

## The Horror, Mark Two

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Atmosphere is a key ingredient in Tony Richards' *The Black Lake*. Richards sets the stage for the horror to come from the very beginning of the story. "Listen," says the jittery Greg Cowley as he and his fishing pals survey the lake before them. "Can you hear? ... There's not a *sound*." (157) Even before the reader is introduced to the less than idyllic surroundings of the place, he receives a hint that something isn't right. A lake devoid of the sounds of nature suggests, on a symbolic level, the *absence* of nature. In case anyone missed the point, however, Richards follows this opening by describing a lake area rife with horrific atmosphere:

The lake stretched out before them, black as tar beneath the pitiless Missouri sun. It was ringed around its entire edge with brown, decaying reeds. There was a tiny island in the middle, and a dead and withered overhanging tree, which, ordinarily, might have provided shelter for teal and coots and other water birds, nesting places and perches for their land-feeding cousins. Not a single high-pitched cry rang out across the lake. No frogs croaked, nothing scuttled through the reeds. There was not even, Cowley noticed, the humming of mosquitos. (157)

Rather than being blue, or even murky green, the lake is black, symbolizing death. The sun, ostensibly a symbol of light and warmth, is instead "pitiless" and implacable, foreshadowing the remorseless character of the evil lake itself. The reeds and trees are dead and decaying, a classic metaphor of horror fiction which denotes death, moral decay and the unnatural. Note how Richards hints again at the unnaturalness of the lake by the subtle inclusion of the word "ordinarily;" ordinarily -- normally, at any truly "natural" lake -- the birds would use the adjacent trees for shelter. Here, there are no birds, no frogs, and no little critters scuttling about. There aren't even any mosquitos. In short, the lake Cowley and Co. encounter is far from "ordinary."

Richards further foreshadows the horror to come when Cowley, uneasy from the start without really knowing why, recalls the "strange looks they had received from the locals... in the town twenty miles back... and the words of the gas station attendant. Lake up there? *Yeah! But no*

*one been near that lake for a long time.*" (158) As Cowley muses about these indirect warnings, Richards continues to set the symbolic table: "The sun was going down by now. Shadows lengthened in its dying rays." Cowley and his friends are fast approaching the end of light and reason, and soon will enter the more unstable, irrational realm of night. Cowley spies a swallow seemingly sucked into oblivion by the lake; shortly thereafter another swallow swoops down upon the lake in pursuit of prey, and "suddenly, there was darkness all around it. Jet blackness. There was no sight of its flapping wings. Its pale flesh of chest had disappeared. There was a splash, and ripples... and the bird was gone." (159) Once again Richards succeeds in creating an atmosphere of horror by conjuring, in almost cinematic style, the image of a creature literally consumed by the sinister black lake. We can imagine the bird being overwhelmed and engulfed in short order, the futile struggle, a splash, a ripple -- then utter, unnatural silence. After catching a "catfish," Cowley's friend Douggie Endell meets the same fate, and Richards increases the story's atmosphere by intermingling the elements of human terror and horror:

Cowley's first thought was, *My God, it's bitten him!*... but the screams were too high-pitched for that. Douggie was trying to stand up, but the fish's mouth had closed around his wrist... In an instant, the fish had lost its shape. It appeared like nothing so much now as an obscene length of quivering black ooze, the same dark color as the lake. It spread up Douggie's arm towards his shoulder. From his shoulder to his face. In an instant, it had filled his eyes, covered his cheeks -- and it was still spreading. Douggie gave out one final scream, inhumanly high and loud.

And then he flailed backwards, out of terror and pain. The edge of the bank crumbled under him. The black lake slid around him, muffling his splashes. He was gone.  
Silence. (160)

The lake then takes the form of the departed Douggie to successfully entrap his grieving friend Hugh, and Richards takes the opportunity to ratchet up the atmosphere of horror by using short, chillingly evocative sentences to describe the action: "A shape began to emerge. A human shape. A head and a pair of shoulders, silhouetted against the reflection of the moon." (162) The final touch of atmospheric horror in *The Black Lake* is an ironic one. Cowley makes his escape in the car the men drove to the lake, but "then he remembered. This afternoon, Hugh Rosario had refilled the radiator with several gallons... from the lake! *He was carrying the water with him!*" (163) Richards

accentuates the atmosphere of horror in the story by employing a neat little "gotcha!"; Cowley realizes that he has not escaped the black lake after all, and as readers we share his surprise and terror.

Unlike *The Black Lake*, the atmosphere of horror that William F. Nolan's creates in *Ceremony* hinges not on an inversion of nature into something unnatural or supernatural, but rather reminds of a classic ghost story. The unlucky fate of its hit-man protagonist is adumbrated by his superstitious aversion to the number thirteen; he has dispatched that many people, and nervously waits to "score" his latest victim so he can split for the Coast as soon as possible, number fourteen safely under his belt. Nolan's first real hint of atmospheric horror occurs as the protagonist wakes up after dozing aboard the bus that's supposed to take him to meet his client:

He woke to darkness. Thick black Rhode Island night outside the glass, an interior dark inside the bus. He'd been jarred awake by rough road under the wheels. Narrow and bumpy. Why had they left the main highway? He got up numbly... and walked unsteadily along the aisle past the elderly couple (godawful boney-looking people) until he reached the driver... The driver was a thin character, with gaunt, stretched skin. (212)

Symbolically, the hit-man has passed from the world of rational logic and objective truth into the more amorphous and irrational realm of night. He is surrounded, both literally and figuratively, by darkness, and the symbolic road he now travels is narrowly circumscribed and jarring -- a one-way road leading to a "dead end" (his). From this point on, the essentially common-sense, take-charge demeanor that's served the protagonist so well in the "real" world will be increasingly undermined ("he walked numbly... unsteadily"). It is significant, too, that his passage into darkness occurs while he's asleep; as a man who has employed both stealth and the element of surprise in his work, it is symbolically fitting that his captors utilize the same techniques to ensnare *him*. The atmosphere of horror is enhanced by the similarly emaciated appearance of the only other people remaining on the bus. The hit-man may not be aware that something strange is going on, but as readers, we are struck by Nolan's seemingly off-hand descriptions of the elderly couple and the bus driver. Why are there only three other people left on the bus, and why do all three look like walking cadavers?

*Ceremony* also contains several touches that intensify the underlying atmosphere of horror. The hit-man, realizing he'll have to stay the night in Doour's Mill, sparks up a Salem cigarette as the bus pulls into town, reminding the attentive reader that Salem is the name of the Massachusetts community infamous for torching witches. The hit-man also arrives in Doour's Mill on Halloween, a time when tradition allows evil spirits free reign over the night. The fact that the inhabitants of Doour's Mill consistently greet the hit-man with "Happy Holiday" adds to the story's eerie atmosphere by suggesting the townsfolk regard Halloween as the ritual equivalent of Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter, which in turn tells us that these are not ordinary folks. Since all the townspeople are thin as a rake and ghostly pale, their misspelling of the holiday -- "Holloween" -- further implies a deviation from the norm and provides another clue that things are not quite right in Doour's Mill. It is also, of course, a terrible pun by author Nolan.

Like Tony Richards descriptions in *The Black Lake*, Nolan's portrayal of the town itself are by-the-book examples of horrific atmosphere:

He passed the dim-lit garage. In the smoked gloom, standing next to a high-piled stack of discarded truck tires, a lean, unshaven mechanic in greased blood-dark overalls stared out at him.

He continued along the street. The gravel gave way to concrete, but the ground was still uneven. Tufted grass spiked up from the wide cracks in the surface. The ancient Victorian houses along the street were in equal disrepair, their gabled bay windows cracked and shadowed. Porches sagged. Roofs seemed hunched against the night. Doour's Mill had gone to seed, a time-worn New England relic of a town that seemed totally deserted. (214)

In the tradition of "classically-based" horror fiction, Nolan's descriptions of physical disrepair and decay are external representations of the moral degeneration and unnatural state of affairs at work in Doour's Mill. They also symbolize a town that "rational, objective, 20th century thinking" has completely bypassed. The hotel the hit-man is forced to stay at -- "The Blackthorn" -- also bespeaks moral decadence and evil. The elevator reaches the hit-man's floor, "and the black door folded back into itself like an iron spider... The hall reeked of mold and decay. Rug was damp, lumpy. Ceiling was peeling away in thick hanging folds, like strips of dead meat." (221) Yet, to the

main character's surprise, he has been given the bridal suite -- another pun from Mr. Nolan, given that the hit-man will shortly share a physical "marriage" and "exchange of bodily fluids" with the townsfolk. The gilt headboard of the room's bed is decorated with plaster angels, yet the gold paint is dull and worn, while the angels sport cracked wings. These details connote a perversion of Christian religious iconography. As Alma's daughter tells the hit-man (right after drugging him), "we don't have a church here anymore. I mean, we *have* one, but it's all boarded up. They broke all the windows." (216) Rejected, it seems, by the outside world, Doour's Mill is a place that has in turn rejected social norms and the principles of Christian faith. Instead, the town embraces a darker, more primitive "faith" through the ritual of The Ceremony.

Nolan's final conjuring of horrific atmosphere is ghastly indeed: the hit-man wakes up from his nap (echoing his original misfortune on the bus) to find himself bound to the bed, trusty Magnum nowhere in sight, and (horror of horrors!) hooked up to "feeder tubes" that remind of "obscene umbilical cords." In a nice bit of cosmic justice, the protagonist is at the mercy of people who are as adept as he at entrapping and disposing of others. The atmosphere of horror is heightened still more by the friendly, cheerfully deferential manner of the murderous folks from Doour's Mill ("Believe me sir, we *appreciate* what you are giving us"... "I tell ya, buddy, we're *deeply* grateful!"). The final stroke of atmospheric horror is that, yes, count 'em, there are thirteen of these pasty-faced monsters, and as the hit-man feels the life draining from his body, he closes his eyes, and the image of "a horrific ring of skulled faces" is the last thing he sees.

W.W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw* is a somewhat more "quaint" horror story, but it's exceedingly rich in atmospheric horror. *The Monkey's Paw* is essentially a tale of Faustian bargain gone predictably awry, and Jacobs begins his story by creating a completely wholesome, intimate and *natural* atmosphere, the better to emphasize the terrible price the White's will pay for interfering with fate. The crucial character flaw of Mr. White is also described, foreshadowing what is to come:

Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of Laburnum villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess; the

former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire. (37)

The ghost-story-around-the-campfire effect of the story is intensified by the visit of Sergeant-Major Morris, who draws the little family in with tales of "doughty deeds... wars and plagues and strange peoples." When the conversation turns to the monkey's paw, Sgt.- Major Morris tells the curious family of its foreign origin; how "an old fakir" put a spell on it to "show that fate ruled people's lives and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow." (39) By placing the monkey's paw (itself a bizarre, not to say repulsive, artifact) in the context of exotic cultures half-way across the globe, Jacobs adds to the story's atmosphere through another trick of classic horror fiction: he imbues the agent of evil with qualities of the mysterious, the alien, the superstitious. Its powers, therefore, can only be guessed at by the less than worldly Whites. Further atmosphere is created after young Herbert asks the old soldier why he hasn't used the three wishes granted by the paw. " 'I have,' (Morris) said quietly, and his blotchy face whitened."

After Sgt.-Major Morris leaves, the atmosphere of horror swells as Mr. White decides to test the power of the paw:

'I wish for two hundred pounds,' said the old man distinctly. A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran towards him. 'It moved,' he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor. 'As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake.' (40)

This passage, like later ones, provokes a very visual response from readers. We can imagine Mr. White standing there, his face silhouetted against the glow of the fire, right hand holding the monkey's paw aloft. He makes the wish, his intonation formal and ritualistic, and in the next instant -- a loud and startling *crash!* from the piano; then, almost simultaneously, Mr. White's shocked response as he feels (or thinks he feels) the monkey's paw writhe in his hands. Directly after this, the atmosphere of the story becomes decidedly ominous: "Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three... (Then) the old man sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it. The last face was so horrible and so simian that he gazed as if in

amazement. It got so vivid, that, with a little uneasy laugh, he felt on the table for a glass... of water to throw over it." (40-41) The tone of the story has grown decidedly darker, as the high wind and odd noises suggest. An "unusual" silence permeates the little villa, and the "dying fire" is symbolic of the imminent dissolution of the White's warm and intimate family unit. The "horrible, simian face" Mr. White sees in the fire symbolizes the evil influence of the monkey's paw that now hangs over the house.

The next day the old couple learn that their son Herbert, "caught in the machinery" at work, is dead. The company man who informs them of his demise proffers compensation -- exactly two hundred pounds. Days pass, and Mrs. White prevails upon her husband to make another wish and bring Herbert back from the grave. Reluctantly, he agrees, and as Mr. White waits with dread for the return of "Herbert," the atmosphere of horror reaches a fever pitch:

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another; and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded at the front door. The matches fell from his hand... he stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock repeated... 'For God's sake, don't let it in,' cried the old man, trembling... There was another knock, and another... He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting. 'The bolt,' she cried loudly. 'I can't reach it.' But her husband was on his knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house... (as the old man) found the monkey's paw and frantically made his last wish. (45)

Note Jacobs' use of the word "it;" who or what is knocking so incessantly on that front door -- Mr. White's son, his beloved Herbert, or a reeking, grinning undead zombie-thing? The fact that Mr. White never finds out for sure allows him -- and us -- carte blanche to conjure all kinds of grotesque images, thereby reinforcing the ambience of both terror and horror. Although *The Monkey's Paw* is primarily a cautionary tale, passages like the one above showcase W.W. Jacobs' matchless flair for creating a heart-stopping, spine-tingling atmosphere of horror, and it's easy to see why the story has become such a classic of the genre. *The Monkey's Paw* has it all; both moral undertones and evocative, horrific imagery.

Like *Dracula's* Professor Van Helsing, Jud Crandall represents "a kind of Guardian Angel" or Keeper of the Secrets in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*. He's a surrogate father-figure to Louis Creed, the guy who knows where all the bodies are buried (and how they come back to life!), and the one who knows it isn't smart to fool with sinister forces you don't understand. Unlike Van Helsing, however, Jud ultimately fails to prevent an abomination of nature and the destruction of the Creed clan that results from it. In fact, it's fair to say that while Louis certainly descends "downward to darkness" of his own free will, the actions of Jud Crandall play a large part in directing him there.

Jud represents both the human capacity for wisdom and, even though he knows better, the equally human propensity for ignoring such wisdom. Symbolically, this dichotomy is evident from the first time we meet him. On arriving at their new house in Ludlow, Louis and Rachel confront their first domestic crisis when their son Gage is stung by a bee. Jud enters the Creed family circle from nowhere and immediately presents his "wily expert" credentials:

Rachel opened her mouth to protest -- his hand looked terribly clumsy and almost as big as Gage's head -- but before she could say a word, the old man's fingers had made a single decisive movement, as apt and deft as the fingers of a man walking cards across his knuckles or sending coins into conjurer's limbo. And the stinger lay in his palm. 'Big 'un,' he remarked. 'No prize-winner, but it'd do for a ribbon, I guess.'  
(20)

Note author King's carefully chosen words describing Jud's actions; reminding of *Dracula's* Professor Van Helsing, they are "apt," "deft" and "decisive," indicating mental agility and strength of character. King also underscores Jud's intermediate status between the mundane and the supernatural by suggesting his behavior is akin to a magician's. Significantly, it is country bumpkin Jud, not the rationalistic, objectively trained Dr. Creed, who saves the day with his brand of folk "medicine." Yet when Louis is mysteriously unable to locate the keys to the new house, Jud just happens to have a spare set. If he is introduced to us as the protector of the Creed clan, Jud is also the fellow who provides the symbolic keys to Pandora's Box.

It is Jud, of course, who tells Louis about the Pet Sematary to begin with. A "peculiar little smile" crosses his face as he informs the newcomer -- without prompting -- of the odd but seemingly benign history of the place. Later, Jud takes the Creeds (again, on his own initiative) up to the Pet



Sematary, where his earliest and least morally compromised admonitions, though oblique, clearly represent a desire to impart "the wisdom of the righteous":

They had gone about a quarter of a mile, moving downhill now, when Jud called Ellie back. 'This is a good walk for a little girl,' Jud said kindly, 'but I want you to promise your mom and dad that if you come up here, you'll always stay on the path... All I'm saying is you don't want to go messing around in these woods, Ellie. You might lose the path and God knows where you might end up then... No need to be scared of these woods... there isn't even any poison ivy or poison oak... This is a good path... It's a *safe* path...' He bent over her and winked. 'It's like many things in life, Ellie. You keep on the path, and all's well. You get off it and the next thing you know you're lost if you're not lucky. And then someone has to send out a searchin' party.' (39-41)

Crandall's words obviously foretell the eventual downfall of Louis Creed, and one wonders if, even then, he knew on some level what sharing the secret of Pet Sematary would lead to. His statement that the actual path which leads there is both "good" and "safe," and that there's "no need to be scared of these woods" is plainly disingenuous as well, since he knows damn well that the woods offer *plenty* to be scared of.

Then, just weeks after wife Norma nearly dies, Ellie's cat Church is killed and the evil influence beyond the Pet Sematary begins to work its insidious will on Judson Crandall. "Loves that cat pretty well, doesn't she?" prompts Jud as the two men examine the cat's broken body. "Yes," Louis replies "absently," thinking it would be best to bury Church and then tell Ellie he wandered off while she was visiting her grandparents over the Thanksgiving holiday. But Jud has something else in mind, and he won't take no for an answer. When he reveals his plan to bury the cat (without mentioning exactly where), Jud doesn't ask Louis, he *commands* him:

'Jud, what the hell are you up to? We can't bury him tonight.'  
'Yeah, we can. And we're gonna.' Jud's face was lost behind the glaring circle of the flashlight.  
'Jud, it's dark. It's late. And cold -- '  
'Come on,' Jud said. 'Let's get it done.'  
'It can wait until tomorrow when we can see -- '  
'Does she love the cat?'  
'Yes, but -- '  
Jud's voice, soft and somehow logical: 'And do you love her?'  
'Of course I love her, she's my dau -- '  
'Then come on.' (125-126)

"Twice -- maybe three times -- on the walk up to the Pet Sematary that night Louis tried to talk to Jud, but Jud didn't answer," (126) yet when they reach it, Jud reveals how clouded his thinking has become, and hints that what he's planning may have dire consequences for Louis: "I hope to God I'm doing right. I think I am, but I can't be sure. Sometimes my head gets muddled." (127) Yet, tellingly, he doesn't abort their mission. At this point Jud becomes almost an inverse Van Helsing character, leading Louis not out of darkness into light, but through darkness toward even greater darkness. He instructs Louis, "just follow me... follow me and don't look down. Don't hesitate and don't look down. I know the way through, but it has to be done quick and sure. (127). As in *Dracula*, belief -- faith -- is required to execute safe passage through evil surroundings, but in this case, the faith has nothing to do with a God in heaven guiding the way to moral restoration. Rather, Jud conducts Louis to the Micmac burial ground intact by transferring his belief in a much more primitive (and malevolent) supernatural force to the younger man.

Continuing on toward the Micmac burial ground, Louis is struck by "something bright and not completely pleasant in the old man's eyes," and when the two finally get there, Jud insists that Louis alone must inter Church ("I'd help you, but you got to do it yourself. Each buries his own"). On one level, Jud is simply following a time-honored ritual; on another, doubtless unconscious level, he is also ensuring Creed's moral complicity in an abomination of nature. It's worth noting as well that Jud's dictate recalls not Guardian Angel Abraham Van Helsing, but rather the evil Count Dracula, who is careful to secure the voluntary cooperation of his victims. When Creed asks why Jud has brought him to the burial ground, the location's evil sway over Crandall is evident even to the befuddled Louis:

'Because you saved Norma's life,' Jud said, and although he sounded sincere -- and Louis was positive he believed himself sincere -- he had a sudden, overpowering sense that the man was lying or that he was being lied to and then passing the lie on to Louis. He remembered that look he had seen, or thought he had seen, in Jud's eye. (136)

Finished burying Church, Louis asks, "Are we done now?" and Jud claps him on the shoulder approvingly. "You did good, Louis," asserts Crandall. "I knew you would." Again, it's not too difficult to see how blinkered Jud's thinking has become under the influence of the Micmac burial ground.

When the reanimated Church returns to haunt the Creed house, Jud at first attempts to rationalize his motives for bringing the cat back by handing Louis some less than convincing treacle about teaching Ellie a lesson about death, which Creed is willing to accept gratefully, given the circumstances. Yet, only moments after Lou exhales a large sigh of relief that there is some sort of *constructive logic* behind Crandall's behavior, Jud explodes this illusion by revealing the ugly, naked truth of the matter:

Abruptly, almost shockingly, Jud covered his face with both hands. For one moment Louis thought he had been struck by a sudden pain, and he half-rose, concerned, until he saw the convulsive heave of the chest and realized that the old man was struggling not to cry.

'That's why, but it ain't why,' he said in a strangled, choked voice. I did it for the same reason Stanny B. did it and for the same reason Lester Morgan did it. Lester took Linda Lavesque up there after her dog got run over in the road. He took her up there even though he had to put his goddam bull out of its misery for chasing kids through its pasture like it was mad. He did it anyway, he did it *anyway*, Louis... You do it because it gets hold of you. You do it because that burial place is a secret place, and you want to share the secret, and when you find a reason that seems good enough, why... Why then you just go ahead and do it. You make up reasons... they seem like good reasons... but mostly you do it because you want to. Or because you have to.

'That place... all at once it gets hold of you... and you make up the sweetest-smelling reasons in the world... Hell, I ain't God, either. But bringing the dead back to life... that's about as close to playing God as you can get, ain't it?' (168)

Along with all of the evidence previously detailed, the above passage offers the best illustration why, unlike Professor Van Helsing in *Dracula*, or even Sergeant-Major Morris in *The Monkey's Paw*, Jud Crandall fails -- and fails miserably -- in his chosen role of intermediary between the worlds of darkness and light and protector of innocents. Despite his cautionary tale about the unfortunate Timmy Baterman in the wake of Gage's death and subsequent censure of Louis for "thinking about things that are not to be thought of," Jud's potency as a vessel of goodness and light is effectively destroyed by his ready surrender to the evil influence lurking in the woods beyond the Creed house. When Jud meets his end at the hands of zombie-Gage in Chapter 58, his death is almost a moral inevitability. Having proven himself unequal to the task of avoiding the temptations of dark forces (unlike, say, *Dracula's* Van Helsing, who remains pure of heart from beginning to end), the tenets of conservative horror fiction decree that Jud must pay with his life. Killing him off

doesn't restore the moral order, but it *does* indicate the unhappy fate of those who fail to muster the Right Stuff. In those terms, it's my view that Jud was doomed pretty much from the start. One can quibble about the symbolic meaning of Crandall giving Louis the house keys, to be sure, but Jud's behavior from that point on is suspect and his motives, at best, are confused. In many ways he is responsible for the destruction of the Creed family, and thus his later good intentions don't count for much, however noble. After all, the guy who opened Pandora's Box has never been regarded as much of a hero, now has he?