

Patient 444

And Other Short Stories



By J.M.Lamoreux

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Forward by J.M.Lamoreux:

My name is J.M. Lamoreux. The stories to come are taken from my experience in the desert, the Tahoe area, the city of Reno, and Carson City, the capital of Nevada. The desert is littered with the ghosts of travelers on their way west. It is choked with the souls of hardy people crushed under the fist of a merciless natural world. This is the raw material that these stories are crafted from. Not all of them are from the same fruit bowl. I have to admit to flights of fancy now and then that venture outside the circle that I've defined for myself

I'm told in this world we live in, where horror is a part of the real world, the horror genre is making a decent comeback. In fiction, your terror can be contained, you can turn off the DVD player, close the book, walk out of the theater, and the terror ends.

If "Patient 444" gives you even a modicum of that power over your fears, then I'm happy. In the meantime, settle in, get comfortable, make sure your bunny slippers are on and your heart medication is handy. And be sure there are no shadowy places where you're sitting. Nothing in this book will hurt you, but I could be insane and lying, and you could be in trouble.

What the hell...enjoy. Right?

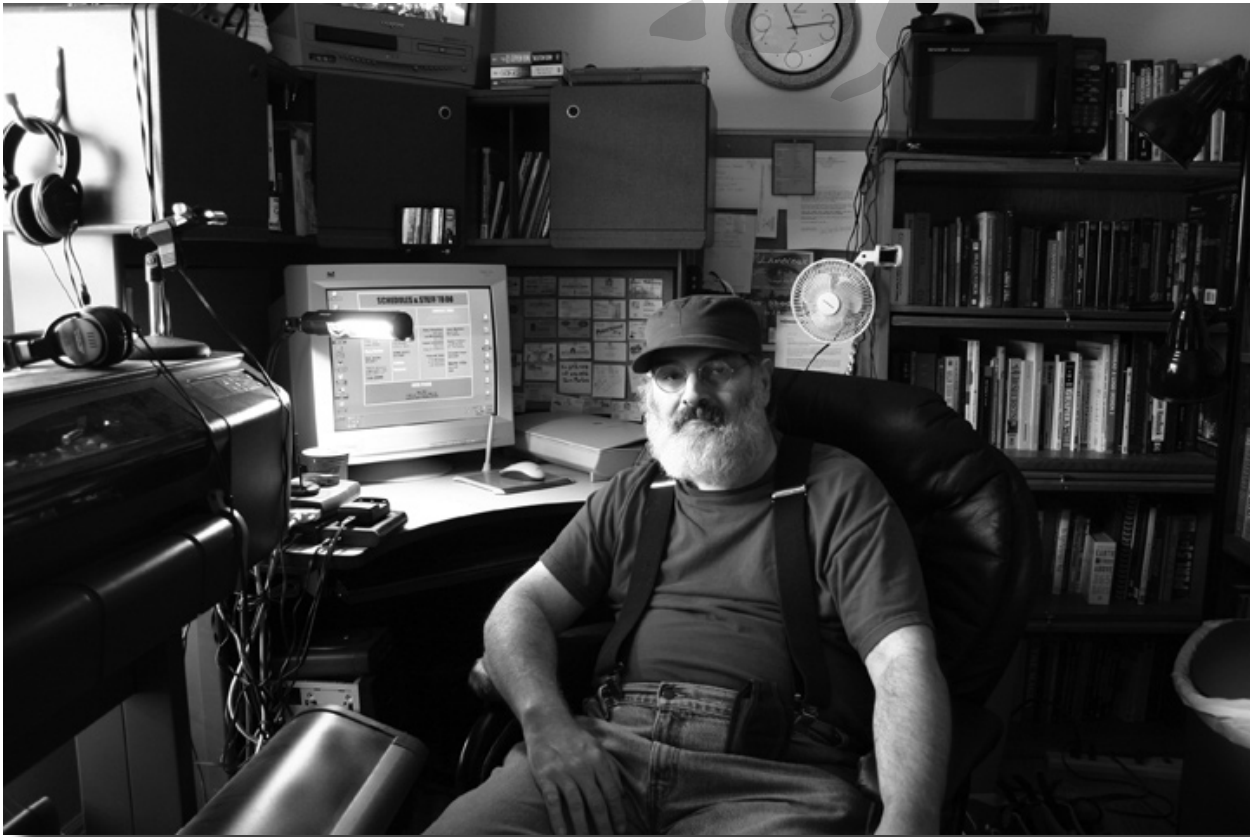


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Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. Although inspired by possible actual events, the names, persons, places, and characters are inventions of the author. Any resemblance to people living or deceased is purely coincidental.



Patient 444

The Abandoned Asylum

As a kid (or an adult if you care to admit it) it is fascinating to watch things decay, from the dead bird in the gutter, to the dog by the side of the road. Decay has a way of de-creating the thing it's working on. The dead bird reshapes into this bubbling mass of insects. The dead dog shrinks and bloats in various places, until it could be anything.

Decay is artistic in a way, instead of *composing* it *decomposes*. It seems boys have a fascination with this; girls make a face and pull away adding an emphatic "Ewwww." That's the way it is, when it comes to decay. Appreciation for it can be gender specific.

Some people track the course of architectural decay in our society. They are called *urban explorers*. They go into abandoned places armed with flashlights, sometimes a camera, and they record the decomposition. They soak up the history of abandoned mills, hospitals, warehouses. They record everything. There is something beautiful the way the light may travel down a peeling wall, or through a broken set of windows. It touches the room, like something Holy.

The decomposition in the ruins can match and pace the quiet crumbling inside you too. It's like looking down into a cave at Carlsbad and feeling the silence. Or it could be like moving around in the home of a shaman marked with the pictographs of a magical age.

Urban explorers move among the ruins of modern society marking and tagging our architectural fossils, and few people recognize the thrill of that, or the service. *Urban explorers* create personal records that lead us down decaying halls where the sunlight drops like shining rot through windows vandalized by bored critics of the art of abandonment and corruption.

This evening, as the white security patrol cars sit at the west end of the discarded Grey Creek Sanitarium (their occupants smoking weed and ignoring the people moving through the dark halls with flashlights to the "hang out" place) George Strauss and his buddy Mike, are talking to a homeless man. He is wrapped in filthy blankets in a refrigerator box outside a liquor store. They're up to no good.

Grey Creek Sanitarium is a large, sprawling mess left by the state of Kansas in 1945. The buildings have been in existence since 1896. The site sprawls over 150 acres of land that looks like an animal refuge at the gates along the wire containment fences. The electrical wires were stripped off them for the copper, just like the copper pipes inside the buildings.

In its prime Grey Creek Sanitarium was state-of-the-art and kept pace with modern technology and the ever-evolving treatment of the insane. It was active when the "Conscientious Objectors" of World War II sentenced to work at sanitariums all over the United States, reported abuses. It was operating while CO's were reporting naked patients sitting on concrete floors, killing each other to occupy themselves. None of that ever happened at Grey Creek.

It had its scars, inflicted by patient care reform. But through it all Grey Creek Sanitarium still got its funding, and the people of Kansas whose mothers, fathers, sons, or daughters had "lost it," had some nice, bright place to drop off their "broken" family members (and still feel good

about themselves).

Grey Creek Sanitarium had huge facilities that included an auditorium for plays and movies, a sprawling kitchen, and a large medical locker full of medicines (chemical straitjackets) for the mentally ill. It had dentist facilities, a gift store, a library, and many other things that made the facility city. When it was “decommissioned” in 1945 because of lack of funds, the patients were moved to places upstate and Grey Creek Sanitarium was left to dissolve into the Kansas soil. It was to this decomposing state facility that George and Mike were leading the homeless person calling himself “Harold.”

One of the complaints the Bradley P.D. had about the abandoned Grey Creek Sanitarium was that not only did kids hang out there drinking, smoking pot, sexing it up, and tagging every square inch of the place, but all too often people were murdered in there. They would decay for a while, draw a battery of flies, and attract the attention of security guards. The coroner would be sent for and what was left of the victim was scraped out of one of the tunnels that snaked and curved under the sanitarium. The tunnels attracted stuff like that. They began as maintenance access routes at one point and changed into patient walkways. They made perfect killing grounds because of the darkness, and of course, no one could hear the screams.

Harold the Human Sacrifice

Harold sucked on his Old Turkey, while George looked at Mike and they both nodded. To his right and behind his back George let the stiletto *snick* open. He walked around the couch exploding with stuffing, and reached over and poked Harold’s neck artery. Harold chuckled and his hand slapped his neck as if he was swatting a mosquito.

He looked at his hand, too drunk to react, and watched the blood trickle in the bowl of his palm to his wrist. He shrugged it off and took another gulp of the Old Turkey. George moved forward and paused a moment, and sunk the blade into the dirty T-shirt fabric covering Harold’s ribbed chest. Harold stopped drinking and looked at the knife handle sticking out of his chest. He began to cry. He mumbled “Why did ya do that for?”

Mike helped George wrestle the struggling Harold lengthwise on the couch. George removed the blade from his victim and handed it to Mike. “Your turn man,” he said. Harold was struggling to get up and was now bawling into the rotting darkness. Mike positioned himself on his knees and began to stab, exploring with the blade, Harold grunting each time it entered his body.

After about twenty stabs, Harold began to twitch, his eyes rolling up into his head. Mike handed the knife back to George, and he took over. They were still stabbing Harold off and on an hour later to probe and feel what it was like to stab into hard muscle, soft stomach tissue, *oh...and this must be his heart.*

The blood traveled in thin rivulets from the cushioned pool Harold made with his body, to the cement floor littered with dirt, paint chips, empty beer cans, and bottles. Harold was still now. He was staring at the darkness in the ceiling, a look on his face as if he had a temporary stomachache from hunger, and too much wine. George and Mike were looking through the crap they had pulled from his pockets. Little there of interest there, nothing that could be translated into drugs or even booze. The plan tonight had been to kill someone. A “thrill kill.” And they had been successful.

As Harold bled onto the dry floor, George and Mike began to explore the interesting if not grotesque art of mutilation. *When the security pricks found this one they were going to hurl for sure.*

Rot is a living thing. Some people believe the walls of a place absorb essence from folks who live around them. It's stored there. It's a fanciful notion at best, but some people will tell wild stories to explain all sorts of complicated "mysteries," that don't need explanation at all. Rot is real...no mystery there.

Neither Mike nor George noticed the eagerness with which the floor of this room absorbed Harold's alcohol and HIV tainted blood. It relished the trauma in it, its acidity, its tainted essence. It drank deep, trying to suck the body fluids down to the last molecule of life force that remained. It was hungry, you could tell. But Mike and George were too busy disassembling Harold to notice.

When they had exhausted their curiosity, they gathered Harold up to move him to one of the long tunnels under the nurses station in the main sunroom. As they were moving Harold to his final resting place, they passed the metal door with the eye port and food tray slot. Mike saw the number on the door. "Four, Four, Four," he said. George made a face and said, "You can read." They both laughed and continued down the hall to the tunnel with this evening's "experiment" dangling between them.

Mr. Dury's Sunday

In 1910, Bradley, Kansas was immersed in 1900's Americana. Bradley itself was populated by not more than 1,500 proud Methodists, some Catholics, some plain heathens. It had a growing agricultural industry that made up the country landscape with nestling silos, barns, stock pens, and crops. The main church in town was Methodist. It was well attended. Many times the city planners met in the upstairs loft to decide how they were going to spend Bradley's money. Nothing special about the town only that it was run by a farming community that was infused with a rural beauty that some recognize, others don't.

The town had its growing pains. Streets and bridges fell into disrepair too soon. And yet there was still that sense of community pride that brought a twinge of regret every time you drove, walked, or rode by that "problem." Of course, the Bradley Town Improvement Committee wanted to do the right thing by their neighbors and voted to jack up local taxes to fix those problems and make them better.

The nine-member committee was new, and eager to please, and didn't calculate the impact it could have on some people in the area. They paid for this neglect of fiscal responsibility. Their hard lesson came at the hands of Gerald Dury. To say Gerald had a temper would be putting it mildly. *But let's not gossip.* His story begins on a Sunday morning in 1910, in the front yard of the Dury farm, his pissy mood having a lot to do with something stuck to his front door, something he was going to take care of right now.

The foreclosure notice would drift on the wind, its top tacked to the green door of the Dury farmhouse. It waved like an arm, loose and limp. The breeze lifted it as if someone unseen was trying to read what it said. It fluttered there for a while, settled against the door, and lifted again, wagged, then dropped back down. It was a red flag to a bull.

Mr. Dury had been unable to pay the property tax hike for the repair of Aaron Street and the goddamn Downtown Bradley Beautification Project those idiots on the improvement committee cooked up last winter. His farm had foreclosed, the same farm his family had owned for thirty-seven years. The people who voted for the tax hike were in church today, and Mr. Dury, the church music director and hymn adviser, was about to pay them a visit.

The only thing heard in the still of that afternoon was two cows mooing in the barn, their feet hobbled with baling wire, and the large blowflies buzzing around the five horse carcasses behind the shed. The foreclosure notice waved again, and Gerald Dury breathed through his nostrils at it as he stood in his front yard, his shirt, and pants bloody, handguns in a holster on his waist and a shotgun in his right hand, sheep knife in a scabbard on his hip. He looked at his wristwatch, and at Mrs. Dury turning at the end of a rope on the brace over the entry gate to the farm.

“You comfortable there old girl?” He asked.

He strode over to where she hung and looked up into her dead eyes. She was in that purple church dress, the one he never liked. The wind tousled her hair, matted in places with fresh blood where he had hit her with a shovel as her hot tea blew all over the dining room floor.

Now that room was ringed with Nobel dynamite sticks attached to a plunger in the front yard. There were Nobels in the basement, around the attic entry, in the shed outside, in the stable, in the garage. Mr. Dury had put Nobel sticks bought by special order at Stanley’s Mercantile in strategic places all over his farm, dynamite bought “To blow up stumps,” he said. On the wooden span above his dead wife, he had placed a painted sign that said, “Come and get it,” in blood red letters.

Now back to the business at hand. The foreclosure notice rattled, drifted upwards and as it began to settle, Mr. Dury grunted and pressed the plunger. The thirty-year-old farmhouse disassembled in a burst of heat, roof parts, brick, and cement dust expanding in a terrible, roaring mushroom. Particles of the place spun into the hot summer sky and landed in a plume of dust in the yard and dirt driveway.

He had fallen to the ground from the percussion of the explosion, but sprang back up like a reanimated puppet, marched to the next plunger, and pressed it. The barn, shed and stable exploded, bloody cow parts hurtling into the sky mixed with green wood, struts, shingles, and hay. The ruins were burning now, the dust billowing and blowing down the long dirt road from the ranch to the main access to town.

Smoke was rising into the hot summer sky as well as particles of ash, bits of paper and dust. Mr. Dury strolled around the ruins of his home inspecting the destruction. Only the fireplace wall was standing. He had placed the dynamite well.

From the spot in the sky where the sun was bearing down, the burned foreclosure notice drifted downward, settled in the yard, and lay trapped in a rosebush still smoking from the explosion. It was like God was saying “Yes but you still have this goddamn notice.”

Mr. Dury strolled over to and checked the bed of his truck. The Nobel sticks, caps, and detonators were still there. He flipped the tarp back over them and got in the cab. He cranked the engine and put the truck in gear. He paused for a moment at the entry to the ranch where his wife dangled by a noose...shoved the truck into gear and headed to town in a cloud of

dry, gray dust.

It was Sunday and most of Bradley Town was at the South River Methodist church. The church itself was around thirty years old, run by Reverend Franks. It was made of wood with a brick base. The windows had stained glass along the backside depicting the rise of the ascended Christ into heaven and various saints, the windows on the sides had rods with curtains.

Reverend Franks was a passionate man, and took his calling seriously. This was the day he was to speak about the perils of drink before communion and the plate passing, the topic of this sermon something he was familiar with and had so far been unable to extract himself from.

Outside, cars were parked in the dirt lot surrounding the church. Pearl Simpson was tending to the children by the stone wall where the wooden tables were placed on the north side lawn of the little Bradley Cemetery. She was trying to wipe Billy Williams's snotty nose and see what the plume of smoke was all about at the north end of town.

Something was burning. She could hear the bell at the firehouse ringing. Soon the horses and the hose and chemical wagon were barreling up the main road of the town headed north towards the smoke. *The Bradley Safety Committee had twice voted down the purchase of "one of those automobile fire engines." They were still operating with the "Hose and chemical wagons," two of which the cash outpouring made the town "Funds Committee" writhe and twitch, the cheap bastards. It cost them over 700 dollars for both units. They were trying to negotiate a "Steam Engine," when Gerald blew the crap out of things and set the rest of the town on fire with flaming, flying debris. Years later, they would spring for two Ahrens-Fox motorized fire engines, tired of houses and businesses burning down and horses dying on them. Today...well, they made do.*

Pearl finished wiping Billy's nose and tucked the kerchief back in her purse. The children were being noisy and she found herself more distracted than usual.

"Please, will you all please settle down," she pleaded.

The fire wagon breezed right past Mr. Dury as he turned down the main street to McCally Avenue with his truck loaded with Nobel dynamite and turned right on Stanley Road. He was about five blocks from the church now, and beyond the trees that framed Stanley Park, he could see that the church parking lot was full. This was good, this was working out well.

Meanwhile the Bradley Fire Department was focused on the smoke at the north of town and made the steep turn to go up to the Dury Ranch in a storm of dust. The bell was ringing and dust billowing when Bert Sailor reached the entrance to the ranch in his Model "T" first, and stopped. The entire brigade scooted to a halt behind his automobile, the men trying to decide who it was that was dangling from that span.

"That's Dury's wife," Bert said. "I think someone needs to get the Sheriff."

Gerald came up on the South River Methodist Church and parked his truck in front of the stone fence next to the step entry to the wide porch and main doors. Pearl Simpson watched him, still too occupied with children to register what he was about, a small boy hanging from her arm and crying about being pushed from a swing.

Gerald gathered the Nobel dynamite sticks, unloaded the detonator, and looked northwards to the smoke still billowing from his burning farm. He sniffed and strode off towards the church. They were singing” Depth of Mercy.”

1”Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God his wrath forbear,
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?”

Gerald set the dynamite in taped clusters around the outside. He placed them by the doors at the front, and the sides and back. Each cluster was wired, the middle stick with a blasting cap and wire that went to a detonator. Clocks were still attached from his “timer” experiments. As he worked, the children were beginning to notice him, and Pearl Simpson, a boy still crying and tugging her arm, moved towards Gerald as he left his little packages around.

He was finishing the last cluster at the back of the church when Pearl stepped up and asked him what he was doing. He stood for a moment, wiped his face, drew the large sheep knife from its leather scabbard at his hip, and sunk it into her throat. Her hand fluttered up to the protruding handle and her eyes rolled back as she sank to the ground and collapsed. The children began to cry.

“I have long withstood his grace,
Long provoked him to his face,
Would not hearken to his calls,
Grieved him by a thousand falls.”

As Gerald moved to the front of the church where the detonators were the children scattered. He stood now and wiped his hands on his coveralls. The three detonators sat in a row in the midmorning sun. Inside the parishioners were still singing.

“I my Master have denied,
I afresh have crucified,
Oft profaned his hallowed name,
Put him to an open shame.”

A boy was standing in front of Gerald, and said nothing at first...just watched. Gerald looked at him and said, “Is your daddy in there?” The boy nodded affirmatively. “Your mommy?” He nodded again. “Then it’s time you got used to the business of being an orphan I guess.”

“There for me the Savior stands,
Shows his wounds, and spreads his hands.
God is love! I know, I feel;
Jesus weeps and loves me still.”

Gerald moved behind the truck with the detonators and plunged the first one. The front of the church erupted in fire, smoke, and debris. There were screams from inside. He plunged the next detonator and the center of the church bulged and erupted in fire and smoke. He pressed the third detonator and the stained glass windows (what were left of them), exploded in a rain of colors as that wall collapsed.

Doug Shoal and Danny Drake came barreling out of the dust and smoke on fire, rolling in the dry grass and trying to put out their burning clothes. Gerald watched them for a moment, the children shrieking in terror by the swings and slide. He lifted the shotgun from the truck and strolled over to them as they rolled in the dust and screamed. He cocked the hammers of the double barrel and shot Doug while singing the rest of “Depth of Mercy.”

“Now incline me to repent,
Let me now my sins lament,
Now my foul revolt deplore,
Weep, believe, and sin no more.”

As Dury was loading the shotgun again (to dispatch Danny), Sheriff Dobbs and five deputies drove up in a cloud of dry dust and jumped out of the Sheriff’s automobile “Hold it right there,” Sheriff Dobbs shouted, his voice strained. “Get your hands where I can see them, now behind your head, lock your fingers.”

Gerald let the shotgun drop to the dirt, looking across the lawn where the playground was, now full of bawling, terrified orphan kids. With a smile on his face, he raised his hands and with fingers locked, got down on his knees as Sheriff Dobbs advanced. Gerald grunted, as Dobbs threw him face down into the dirt...and cuffed him.

And that was how Gerald Dury came to be a permanent resident at Grey Creek Sanitarium. Oh, the prosecution worked hard to fry Mr. Dury, showing the jury pictures of the ruined, smoking church, the charred bodies of parishioners being sifted out of the ruins. The courtroom was adorned with all 56 deceased in family photos to garner sympathy for the victims. But it was Gerald Dury that captured the imagination, disgust and yes, even pity of the jurors.

The instructions for the insanity plea were clear. As Gerald stared at the courtroom windows, after five days of deliberation, a jury of his peers made him a permanent resident of Grey Creek Sanitarium, home of the state of Kansas’ criminally insane.

Gerald had a room on the fourth floor of the 14-year-old building. It was 8 feet by ten feet with a bolted down cot, porcelain toilet, and iron door with a large food and mail slot. The observation hole was stitched with little bars, and the window in his room was obscured glass with more bars. He was fed three times a day through the slot, but given no eating utensils.

He was handled like an animal, having to back up to the tray slot with his hands behind his back, putting them out there so he could be cuffed before he was taken to his “yard time.” In the hall the mouth harness was sometimes slipped on and buckled (he had bitten a nurse). His medicine was injected. He was treated like a beast, because he had become one.

This day there was no mouth harness. He sat on the metal bench in the sun while two orderlies stood guard over him. In the dry grass, a woman attended to butterflies that weren’t there, calling them by name and trying to decide the sex of each one. A man stood by a large tree in his robe rocking back and forth and talking to the roots in the damp shade. Someone else was by the Koi pond looking into the sun and laughing, until their orderly came and gave them their medication. After a while, they sat by the pond and stared at the colored fish. In the yard by the generator shack, a woman was singing to a cluster of birds on a static telephone wire.

² “Hushed was the evening hymn,

The temple courts were dark;
The lamp was burning dim
Before the sacred ark;
When suddenly a voice divine
Rang through the silence of the shrine.”

Gerald heard her, turned his head and began to sing (he knew this one) so as not to upset his orderlies.

“The old man, meek and mild,
The priest of Israel, slept;
His watch the temple child,
The little Levite, kept;
And what from Eli’s sense was sealed
The Lord to Hannah’s son revealed.”

The woman heard him as he raised his volume and she turned to where he sat. She stood in the bright sun, her hair matted, her eyes wild with medication and madness. She continued, and Gerald sang with her.

Instead of interfering, the orderlies listened. The words of the song touched them somehow, the voices of the singers strong and beautiful. Gerald began to harmonize.

“O give me Samuel’s ear,
The open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear
Each whisper of Thy Word,
Like him to answer at Thy call,
And to obey Thee first of all.”

The people who could hear the music began to focus on Gerald and the woman. A few gathered to listen. At first the orderlies were nervous and tried to manage the crowd, but then they saw for themselves the soothing effect the song had, and relaxed as much as they could, still keeping a wary eye on their charges.

“O give me Samuel’s heart,
A lowly heart, that waits
Where in Thy house Thou art,
Or watches at Thy gates;
By day and night, a heart that still
Moves at the breathing of Thy will.”

They sang the words, patients and orderlies alike mesmerized, the notes trailing off across the yard.

“O give me Samuel’s mind,
A sweet unmutur’ring faith,
Obedient and resigned
To Thee in life and death,
That I may read with child like eyes
Truths that are hidden from the wise.”

The words ended and then there was silence. The woman stared at the dry lawn for a moment and her orderly came forward and took her arm, leading her back to her cell. Gerald felt the orderlies assigned to him lift him by the armpits and lead him to his cell too. The sanitarium de-evolved into a place where people lived their mangled lives sometimes in the daylight, sometimes behind safety glass and bars.

The sun drifted across the sky and it began to settle into twilight. The lawn was empty now, the wind thrumming through the chain link fences and curled barbed wire that kept the world safe from the insane. Owls hooted in the trees on the property beyond the sanitarium's fences and gates. Inside the state hospital, patients made their own music as the moon drifted pale and white into the treetops and hung there smiling

Gerald was getting dinner served to him by the orderly named Bob. As he reached for his plate, he was startled by howling that blasted down the cold corridors and rattled around in his head like an army of angry bees. He managed to look at Bob as he helped him handle his tray. Bob's face took on a sense of dread.

Gerald asked, "What was that?"

Bob shook off his trance and answered, "That's Mr. Cochran."

"Why does he howl like that?" Gerald asked.

The orderly looked at Gerald for a minute and spoke. "He's insane, like you. Some months ago, we had to restrain him in a jacket, because he had dug out both his eyes with his fingers. He complained that his eyes had set his brain on fire and he needed to remove them to stop the burning. Now he howls at the moon. We don't know how he can do this, but he always knows the direction the moon has risen, and faces it to howl. He only howls at the full moon."

Gerald, still thinking about Mr. Cochran, sat on his bed with his tray. Bob looked at him from the peek hole in the door for a minute, and returned to the orderly station at the end of the hall. Inside two other orderlies were watching wrestling. They turned up the TV and closed the door to try to drown out Mr. Cochran.

None of the other patients on the floor acted up...the guttural quality and animal power in Mr. Cochran's howls spoke to an instinct in them all. *Like when the forest hushes as the big animals roar. You don't want to let them know where you are.*

Mr. Cochran howled again.

Gerald closed his eyes and saw the burning South River Methodist Church. He saw the smoke and fire curl around the toppled, white cross. He was standing on the stone steps to the large entry, and out of the fire a huge wolf emerged, its eyes cold, its teeth bared. Its fur was smoking and singed, drool flecked its pink tongue and damp, black muzzle. It was the size of a large bear.

Growling, it moved towards Gerald, who had become paralyzed with fear, unable to stir. It approached him, its face sucking up the world and becoming all Gerald could see in his mind. There was just these two cold, feral eyes, and the harsh panting, hot breath permeated with the stink of death and the screams of the parishioners of the South River Methodist Church

rising like the smoke to meet each heart beat pounding in Gerald's chest. He understood the soul of Mr. Cochran, it was in him too...like a disease.

The howl that came next rose like something terrible giving birth. It sprang from the larynx that spawned it, like an angry, scratching, mauling thing that had no soul. It reveled in the burning bodies, the terrified screams, the billowing smoke, and the sickly, sweet smell of burning flesh.

It rose, and with its white teeth slashed at humanity, aiming for the jugular, and it had no conscience. It was there to kill, and feed on what it had killed. That was all that was there behind its cold, feral eyes. That was all that would ever be there. Another howl ripped and twisted upwards from the guts of hell and clawed at the soft underbelly of the weak and innocent, and the forest hushed itself, the hunted terrified to be found by the hunter.

“Wonderful,” Bob said to the other orderlies. “ Now we have another howler on the ward. Ok, which one should we sedate first?”

“You ain't getting me around Cochran. That bastard is a spooky son of a bitch.”

Bob reached into the icebox and began to prepare a syringe. “That second one is Gerald right?”

The little orderly named Richard said, “We need to listen first before we go poking anyone, but it sounds like him.”

“Why don't these guys just shut up and jerk off quietly or something,” the black orderly Edward, added as he adjusted up the TV volume again.

Bob opened the door and started down the hall. “Let's begin with Gerald then,” He said. “ Ed, you're the biggest, come with me.”

“I don't get paid enough for this shit,” Ed said as he put his drink down and prepared to sedate this “howler.”

They moved down the hall to the cell of patient 444. Standing outside the cell door it was certain the new howls were coming from there. Bob removed his flashlight from its harness and showed it into the cell. Gerald was turned facing the moon that drifted in a filtered light through the obscure glass windows, sliced in strips by the thick, black bars.

“Come on Gerry, we're trying to watch TV down there,” Bob said. “Take the position man,” he added hauling out the cuffs. Gerald stopped howling and began to growl. It made the hair stand up on the orderlies' necks.

“Come on man, don't fuck with us now,” Ed said.

Gerald turned away from the moonlight and towards the door. His face was in shadow but he was panting like a dog. For reasons he couldn't explain later, Bob let the flashlight beam fall on Gerald's eyes.

“Oh shit,” He said, for all of them. At that exact moment, Gerry bared his teeth and raised his bloody hands, his blackened eye sockets expressing wordless rage.

“We’re going to need more people,” Ed barely got out before the hallway became a storm of snarling, screaming, yelling, struggling flesh.

Urban Explorers

Decay has a way of disassembling things that you could identify once, but are unidentifiable later to you as they decompose. What did that used to be? You can only guess. Sometimes though, there’s enough of what’s left to keep some fragment of what it was recognizable. This is what the *urban explorers* like, this is how they *get off*. They are *Corruption Detectives*. It’s fun to try to imagine what function something served before it was tossed off and left to rot into oblivion. Old places, abandoned for eternity, have things to say.

They tell their story in their history. Many people don’t bother to read that narrative though. It’s the fate of abandoned landmarks that they are spattered with “tagging,” tarnished with the graffiti of people *hanging out*.

There’s something about an abandoned wall that needs desecration. There’s something about a religious statue in a deserted chapel that needs beheading. These old buildings endure outrage after outrage. And the only time they strike back is when one of the defilers gets cut on broken glass or falls screaming through an upper floor.

The *urban explorers* arrived at Grey Creek Sanitarium around three o’clock P.M., armed with flashlights, a Canon SLR digital camera with strobe and a solid camera tripod for places they didn’t want to light up...for that “arty” effect. There was Bob Ryan, a kid from L.A. who responded on an *urban explorer* mailing list to an opportunity to wander in “old nut houses,” and decided this was a good way to do some photo journaling. Lila McCaffy was a local and hung out with other kids at Grey Creek Sanitarium, smoking pot and goofing on the debris while hiding from security. She would be the guide. Joe Leland was a jock, and was trying hard to get into Lila’s pants, discovering that it wasn’t bad to be “slave to the booty” after all.

It’s these three, on March 3 around 6:45 P.M., who are going to meet the darkness in these old halls that the blood of Harold Ostrander has *woken up*, so to speak. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, and we also needn’t assume that this *spookiness* is exactly what the *urban explorers* will meet in the guts of Grey Creek Sanitarium. Oh no. Sometimes darkness is going to be darkness, and nothing more. It’s how we react to it that makes the story.

Grey Creek Sanitarium has a maze of tunnels, a fact that we’ve touched on before. And it is these tunnels the *urban explorers* want to investigate first. The entry to the main tunnel that goes under the central vestibule to the “sign in” station has metal doors, the handles long since stolen. *Don’t worry, we can still get in. Joe has a crowbar.*

The *urban explorers* have left their cars in the “Dad’s Liquor” parking lot (“Dad’s” has a special on “Old Turkey” right now). Carefully, Joe raises one of the metal doors with that crowbar and the rest of them enter the tunnel, flashlight cones dancing over the debris and peeling walls.

The tunnels under Grey Creek Sanitarium are long ones, but some have been sealed, especially the ones the Bradley P.D. have found bodies in. The building is like a corpse. You follow the

tendons that would be the piping left from the heating and cooling systems. The bones are the metal supports inside the concrete. You are walking around inside a body left to rot because it could no longer be supported by the community, and now decomposes in sight of everyone, because it can't even be buried properly.

The *urban explorers* follow the tunnel to a metal ladder leading up to an open hatch. (All the doors are either open, smashed or off the hinges at Grey Creek Sanitarium).

“Do you know where the fuck you are?” Bob asks Lila, his flashlight cone jittering over the debris that seems to be crawling under his feet.

“Sure, I come here a lot,” she says casting a glance at Joe. He smiles.

They go up the metal ladder and find themselves in the main admittance hall. This is barren of any furniture, and has a hole in the wall over the administration station where a metal clock used to be.

In every room, lights have fallen to the floor from the rotting ceiling. This one is no exception. Bob sets up his camera and takes some shots. There is one disintegrating swivel chair at the main desk. The light accents it as if a ghost is having a coffee break. He softens the flash and snaps.

They move along the admittance hall to the main corridor. This is where the examination rooms were, “triage” for in-patients. Beyond that was an open area with a decaying wood canopy. A dried Koi pond was in the center, littered with dead water plants and a silent rock waterfall.

“This way,” Lila says. The others follow.

Through wood doors with all the glass panes shattered, they turn past a nurse's station and down a hall through which light is filtered by glass greasy with decay. They turn to pass through another office suite and Lila points to a dentist's chair.

“It's still here because no one can get it out of the floor,” she notes.

They enter a series of hallways, many are obscured with debris, and some are impassable. They emerge into another open area framed in glass broken and sparkling on the cement floors. Lila turns a corner and pushes some double doors.

“This is the kitchen,” she says.

It looks like the Sistine Ceiling. It's high, with a huge vent over the preparation tables. The freezer is large enough to get a car in. The door has been removed. Inside, the shelves are mottled with rot. Bob takes a few pictures, checks them in the LCD frame, and nods to Lila. They move on out another set of double doors and turn left down a curved hallway that slopes downward. The fading sun filters dusty light over the debris there. Lila makes an abrupt left, saying as she does, “This you have to see.”

They enter a room that has three autopsy tables in it. “This is some creepy shit girl,” Joe says. “I don't know what you get out of this place.”

Bob starts to set up the tripod and Lila stops him.

“Wait, there’s more.”

She leads them through more metal doors and they come to a place that she calls *The Freezer*. It’s the device that cooled the bodies of deceased patients. It’s tagged as if people visiting it had tried to dampen its power, its threat...paint cans hissing away at the evil.

“Start here,” Lila tells Bob, “and then work your way out.”

Being in this place has made her horny and she disappears into a darkened room with Joe. Bob can hear them both grunting and kissing. He sets up the tripod and adjusts his exposure time. He begins to shoot the freezers. They are typical of a morgue.

Knowing a little of the history of mental health in America he wonders if any of the occupants of these drawers had been victims of fellow inmates, cruel experimentation with electroshock or lobotomies. Or had they died of old age?

Bob Ryan’s Little Secret

Bob Ryan likes to take pictures. It was in college at UCB that he became interested in the work of Sally Mann and in particular her book “What Remains.” Bob was one of those kids who liked to watch the dead dog decompose. He was fascinated with the process of death.

In Mann’s book, she photographed bodies on a “death farm,” a place where decomposition is studied forensically. Bob liked to observe the faces of the dead locked in necrotic sleep, and observe how they fell apart after a while. He was able to talk a friend into getting his buddy from one of the nearby medical schools to let him have a cadaver hand. The illegality of it excited him...but not as much as being able to watch the hand’s slow mummification.

Of course, Bob’s hand decayed on the window ledge and drew ants, and maggots. He was forced to incinerate it, and watched it burn to ash in the flames. Still his curiosity was not satisfied. The little boy in him wanted to see a cadaver decaying.

He knew of a place by the Hann Bridge in the mountains around L.A. where dead transients were discovered all the time. The coroner’s office was kept busy up there filling those paupers’ graves. Bob drove up there one afternoon in his Volkswagen Beetle and went hunting. The area around Hann bridge had places that hid you from the highway. There were more treacherous places further down, that if you navigated carelessly, you’d die, falling 50, and in some places 100 feet.

No bodies. Nothing at all, Just dirty backpacks, blankets, cardboard and empty bottles. The sun was hot, and made the rocks and dirt ripple with heat. Bob had just about given up when he saw someone asleep under a small rock cover. You could barely make them out they were so dirty, their filth blended with the earth, the skin dark with the sun and dirt. Bob walked over to the “troll thing” and as he approached, it woke.

It wanted a drink, and not of water. It smelled like shit.

There’s a moment in everyone’s life that they come to a place of “crossover.” They make a

decision and there's no going back on it, no repairing what was broken. It's like when you find something laying around unguarded, and you want it, and no one's there to keep it from you. So you just take it. There it is. It's all done, no going back, no turning around. It is busted on the cement floor, and no amount of glue will put it back together again.

Bob knelt down and with both hands, strangled the thing under the rocks. It fought for life. It may have even wanted to die. Whatever it wanted, it was dead now, because that's what Bob wanted. He moved the remains of the dead man to a place close to the bluffs where the plants were thickest, and stood and marked it with his mind.

In his photo files now, are a suite of pictures no one will ever see. They are like that letter from your high school sweetheart or those magazines you don't want anyone to see you "reading." They are dated and have comments. They note the temperature, the periods of rain. They are matted and mounted, some treated in sepia, some in black and white, and towards the end, in color. He didn't stop taking pictures until the body was spotted by hikers and the coroner called.

After the first "experiment," Bob became a "Boogieman" for the homeless. He fed off the weak, never trying to murder anyone who looked like they could fight back. He bought a double bladed grip knife for a jugular cut. He killed until he got tired of killing, and then he decided one day that he would photograph decaying houses, farms, asylums... just like that. Bob's hands were bloody all right, but like those special photos no one would ever see, no one would guess his "secret," at least no one alive maybe. *You probably see Bob a little differently now don't you? He fooled you, but he didn't fool whatever was coming alive on the fourth floor. You'll see soon enough.*

Click-flash.

Move the tripod a little.

Click-flash.

A rhythmic noise comes from the room that Joe and Lila are in. Bob picks up and moves out to the autopsy room...to give them privacy.

Click-flash.

The autopsy tables are revealed. The metal is crusted; the drains for body fluids in the tabletop are brittle and dusted with red.

Click-flash.

How many inmates had rested on these tables, their chest opened to the overhead lights, the tops of their skulls popped back like a walnut? It was getting late. What little light there was began to sink into the decaying walls and dissolve into darkness. Lila and Joe emerged from the other room disheveled...definitely more relaxed.

"It's getting dark," Lila said. "I need to show you one more place before we go."

"What's that?" Bob asked.

“It’s really cool; it’s the ‘criminally insane ward. It will creep you out.”

Grey Creek Sanitarium was known for its innovations concerning the management of the criminally insane. Sometimes the institution took on patients from other states; they were good at what they did. The “Criminally Insane Ward” was on the fourth floor of W1 (Wing 1). It was built like a jail, with large doors in three successive sets that could only be locked and unlocked in unison from one place in an elevated control and observation post at the north end of the hall. Everything was open now, the mechanisms in the doors long stolen or dismantled. Bob could sense Lila’s excitement. She dug this stuff.

They found the stairwell, pushed past the door nearly off its hinges and entered. Their flashlights flicked along the stairs. Their feet shuffled in the rubble on the cement steps. They were on the second floor already. Two flights up and they were where they needed to be. At the fourth floor there was no door to open, just a frame. They stepped inside to the admittance room where the patient files used to be placed in wall racks; they saw the orderly’s desks, the stand where a T.V. went, and a place where a refrigerator used to be.

“This is where they kept some weird sons of bitches,” Lila said breathlessly. “These were the worst of the worst.”

She led them through the three sets of metal doors into the hall where the cells were lined up. They all stood there for a moment, the history of the place seeping into their minds like the dust settling from their footsteps. Each cell had only one bed, a porcelain toilet, and a window with bars. The glass was dirty. No one could see out.

“This is a hang out,” Lila said. “Some of us come here to smoke dope, drink, freak...you know.”

Bob put his tripod up. Once ready, he took high exposure shots of each cell. Some had beer cans in them, water stained magazines, *and yes, here and there a discarded condom*. Bob wanted to record each cell. As he moved along the hallway, he began to think about the men imprisoned here. There was no window, no companionship, just this room...and time...lots of time.

“Lila check this out,” Joe said, pointing inside room 444. Lila looked and recoiled. Inside was a couch soaked in dark blood. They all collected around it. It hummed with flies and stunk of rotting body fluids.

“Another one,” Lila said .

“Another what?” Bob asked.

“There’s been someone killing homeless people and sort of...dissecting them. We find these messes sometimes. These are some sick fucks.”

Bob stood for a moment, letting the blood and the smells settle in his head. He raised the camera and...

Click flash.

He takes more pictures, wondering how whoever died there was killed. Did they know they

had come there to die? He thought he could hear someone pleading for their life. But there was no mercy to be given that day.

In the corner of the room was an empty bottle of Old Turkey. That was a cheap trade for a soul. Hell...that was no trade at all. But it was the wall above the bed that reeled in his attention. On it, someone had scratched in the green paint some words.

“Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God his wrath forbear,
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?”

Bob had always been, well, sensitive. As an artist, he “felt inside” what he photographed in ways that few people understood. One of the things you notice right away is how sensitive people “absorb” Life. They see the world like a dog does. Other people just see a lawn for instance. But a dog sees a lawn that reveals its secrets to it, by smell. He knows who has passed over the dry grass, who has marked this rock or that brick planter. He can tell who was there and what they did when they were leaving their mark.

Places can have that effect on sensitive people. Places that have been steeping in their own stew are sometimes thick with the virus of their own history. Sometimes the latent “insanity” that may be lurking in us all latches onto someone, and creeps from mind to mind until it finds what it’s hungry for. There’s nothing that predestines anyone to be susceptible to that... except maybe that kindred feeling we have when we connect with something in someone’s life that resonates with things inside us we didn’t think were there...but they were. They sure as hell were.

The words on the wall seemed to be dug there by fingernails (it had to be, who would give these guys something sharp to play with?), black blood smears accompanying some of the letters. This person wanted to communicate.

But Bob made the mistake of closing his eyes at that moment, letting everything inside that had been jabbering around him for hours now, and he saw the face of a giant wolf come at him, out of a roaring inferno.

There were screams; there was an intensity of hate that came boiling up inside this vision. It was hate beyond reason or redemption. It was hate born of betrayal. It was hate that was old, hungry, and waiting for fresh coals to burn, fresh wood to combust. The intensity of the image startled him and he stumbled backwards dropping his SLR, hearing the case and lens pop.

“Fuck, there goes your pictures man,” Joe said.

But Bob was sitting by the remnants of the toilet, looking at his hands. His eyes were slits; they were full of light and fire. His head was burning, from the brain stem across the crown of his skull and down deep into his eyes. This was intolerable. The pain was intolerable. The last thing he heard seconds after he raised his hands to his eyes was Lila screaming, “For Christ sake don’t do that!” And then he felt the balls of his eyes collapse from the pressure of his fingers.

All he could do now was howl. That was all there was left to do. And that’s what he did.

The “Weird Picture”

Lila was, well...fucked up. She was at her brother’s house smoking crack and drinking Schlitz Malt Liquor. She was weaving over her brother’s shoulder as he tried to access the Flash Card of Bob’s camera.

“He took more pictures than I thought,” Lila remarked as best she could.

There were pictures of the façade of the sanitarium, one of Joe’s back, the patio, a chair, the autopsy tables, and the storage freezer for the dead. There was sensitivity in them. A feeling for the life inside the decaying things they revealed. It was “reverence” maybe. To Lila the sanitarium was just a place to hang out, get high, and have sex. But this guy, it was like he belonged there.

Lila reacted to the next pictures.

“This is them,” she slurred. “This is the bloody stuff.” Both she and her brother looked at the ruined sofa spattered with darkness and pain. They swallowed. Lila took another noisy swig of beer to wash the taste of her fear away. Her brother opened the picture of the wall with writing on it in his graphic file viewer. He turned and looked at his sister.

“You did this shit, right? You did it in Photoshop.” It was a rhetorical question. He laughed, and turned to get a friend from the living room to show him Lila’s “goof.” But Lila wasn’t laughing. She was standing transfixed, as she stared at the photo on the computer screen. In a strong transparency, visible on the wall, was the emerging head of a large, and pissed off wolf.

¹ “Depth of Mercy,” Charles Wesley, *“Hymns and Sacred Poems,”* 1740.

² “Hushed Was The Evening Hymn,” James D. Burns, *“Evening Hymns,”* 1857.

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J.M.Lamoreux was born in Los Angeles, California December 19, 1949. He was raised in Buena Park by his parents Dorothy and Chuck, and enlisted in the Army in 1968. This included a stint in Vietnam.

He is currently a resident of Reno, Nevada, an area rich in historical and urban folklore, much of which shows up in the context of his work. His short story, "The Egg" (featured in this collection) won best fiction for 2005 in a contest sponsored by the Truckee Meadows Community College literary and art magazine "The Meadow."

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