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ANOTHER FLESH

I.

When my elder siblings and I were very young, our parents returned to Sesqua Valley, the land of their origin. As a child there had been something about the valley, and the large old house in which we lived, that affected my nerves. I often suffered queer nightmares. Things I saw – or thought I saw – in dark verdant shade beyond our yard took an unhealthy hold of my imagination. My fears were always soothingly dismissed by Mother, but the situation has had a lasting affect. Perhaps that is why I reacted as I did, last week, when my oldest sister died.

My brother, James, felt a profound distaste for Sesqua Valley and its queer inhabitants, and departed from us as soon as he came of age. Victoria, the firstborn of us children, was his complete opposite, for she adored the valley and often accompanied Mother on long walks. I was always astonished, and I think envious, of the sense of wonder that glowed in her violet eyes when she returned from such wanderings; and often I would creep silently past her slightly opened bedroom door, catching sight of her scribbling into her pad of yellow paper. Victoria was a poet, but Mother was the only family member to whom these works were ever shewn. I never dared to invade the privacy of that bedchamber, until the

recent and very weird event.

Oh, I was obsessed with that room, certainly. Perhaps I felt neglected. I loved Mother, yet sensed that she had been somehow disappointed in me. I felt her distance. Sometimes as a child I would get out of bed late at night so as to use the bathroom. When I passed the closed door of Victoria's room I would often hear the low chanting of her soft voice. At times Mother's accompanied her voice. At other times I imagined that I could discern other voices, strange and far off. I would stand in the darkened hallway and listen to that weird chanting, and to the valley's pulse that sounded deep inside my eardrums. Sometimes I thought that the entire house throbbed to that uncanny rhythm, as if something were pounding beneath the ground, begging entrance into the world above.

With what chill I recall that strangest of all evenings. Father was away as usual on a business trip, and Mother and Victoria had been spending every evening in my sister's room, crying to the valley in esoteric song. I remember how it chilled me to hear the beasts that lived on Mount Selta cry as if in response to the clamor. I remember the thick cloud of mauve fog that issued from the woodland and encased the ancient house. I sat at my window, watching that mist in fascination. I placed my tiny hand upon the window's glass and shivered at its chilliness. I watched the peculiar shadow-shapes that seemed to drift within that vapor just outside my window. Then suddenly the mist was gone, and the singing in the other room was replaced with joyous laughter. Cracking open my bedroom door, I watched the door to Victoria's chamber, and saw it quietly open. My mother and sister emerged, sheltering from view a third figure, tiny and dwarfish.

At breakfast the next morning I was introduced to my newest sibling, the mysterious Edith. We had "adopted" her, I was told. This newest addition to the family perplexed me. Perhaps I resented how she was obviously Mother's new darling. Once I began to tease her because of the way she smelled, like wet leaves on a stormy day,

and I cruelly mimicked her ugly goat-like face, making obnoxious bleating noises. Mother reprimanded me severely, as did Victoria. Edith watched in silence, gazing at me with her odd silver eyes, eyes that were the same color and shape as Mother's.

The day came when Father never returned from one of his many trips. Nothing was ever explained to me of this event. Victoria would merely shake her head and say that Father had gone away. I was a teenager when Mother came to my room and said goodbye. This was our most tender moment together, and I loved the feel of her slender hand in my hair, her soft mouth pressed to my tear-stained face. I listened to the sound of Victoria's sad singing, watched the mauve mist that spilled from the woodland. I looked out my bedroom window at the ground below, where Edith stood holding Mother's hand. The thick mist enveloped them, and when at last it drifted back to the woodland, Edith stood alone.

It was after this that Edith began to vanish for days at a time. Victoria never seemed to mind or worry, and indeed began to take an almost maternal interest in me, encouraging my growing interest in literature and my frail early attempts at fictional composition. Yet I sensed that she and Edith had some special and unspoken connection, of which I was not a part. I envied the looks they would share when Edith would suddenly return from having been gone for days. Once I boldly asked Edith where she had been. I'll never forget the answer.

"I walk the shadows of the valley, William, those dark places that you are so eager to avoid. Of what are you afraid? If only you would close your eyes and silence your frantic fears, oh!, the things you would sense and perhaps begin to understand. Why must you remain such a dense clod? Do you never hear Mother's lullaby on the night wind? Are you doomed to stay an outsider all your pathetic life?"

An outsider. Yes, that was how I was always made to feel, by everyone I loved and lived with. Now, in these twilight years, I have a kind of understanding, incomplete as it is. I've learned to accept in silence this haunted

valley's ways. I've had my career, such as it was, as romantic novelist. Still, as I mentioned, my nervous system was never hearty. When, in early adulthood, Edith became interested in sculpting, my frail imagination reacted in violence to the hideous gargoyle faces and figurines that she created. I recall one afternoon, when I had finished working on a chapter and came downstairs so to puff upon one of the scented cigarettes that I aesthetically smoked in homage to Wilde. I could hear Edith working in the sunroom at the back of the house, and I decided to be bold and spy on her. There she sat, among the potted plants, painting one of her daemonic stone faces. I did not like the way she sang to it, nor the way the thing's face seemed to come to ghastly life as more and more paint was applied. Then Edith slowly turned and gazed at me. Oh, those silver eyes beneath the thick dark brows! And when she suddenly smiled I nervously noted the resemblance between her goat face and the stony visage that glistened wetly on her worktable.

But that was aeons ago. It has, of course, been heavily on my mind since Victoria's death last week. I am trying, I suppose, to understand the events that have occurred – that still occur, and from which there is no sane escape. Even as I pen this journal entry I can hear the chanting voices and feel the swaying of this ancient house. I can feel deep within my soul the pulse of Sesqua Valley in answer to that mantra from Victoria's room. No, there is no escape. I must set this aside and go to them.

II.

The unnerving events began two weeks ago. Victoria and I were spending a quiet evening reading in the living room. Edith quietly entered the room with something, some new work, in hand. I intuited that she was intensely interested in Victoria's reaction to the thing she set on the table before the sofa. I stared at the sculptured stone in bewilderment. What on God's good earth was it supposed to represent? It seemed to resemble a cluster of

clouds, yet there was something in its form that suggested sentience. I felt oddly afraid looking at it.

“What on earth do you call that?” I stammered.

“I call it ‘Shub-Niggurath’,” came Edith’s cool reply.

“What a cryptic name,” uttered Victoria, putting down her book and approaching the low table. “It’s fascinating. And how odd; for I’ve recently written a new poem that complements your work. Let me see if I can recall it.” I was stunned. In our many decades together, my sister had never shared with us her poetry. It was her private mode of self-expression and self-discovery, as she once explained it to me. And so I sat with mouth wide open as Victoria stood straight, leaned back her head and closed her eyes, then began to recite.

“The dark hath come with furtive stealth
To ease my mind, my soul’s ill-health.
Night’s pale mauve fog consumes my breath.
What revelation comes with death.
Those sifted sands of life are stopped.
Into a charming void I’m dropped
Where solace sings with lonesome tongue
From mouths numbered a thousand young.”

“Oh, dear,” Edith laughed. “Are you to be adopted into the Black Goat’s number?” Victoria secretly smiled, and continued.

“The writhing fog transfigures me
And ushers forth eternity.
I find the realm where I belong,
Wherein is echoed Mother’s song.
From shadow’s realm I’ll ne’er depart.
I pulse within the valley’s heart.”

I listened intently, and watched Victoria’s eyes grow moist with emotion. The tears began to flow from my own eyes. Smiling, my elder sister took my head into her hands and kissed my forehead. Then she took up the thing of stone, looked at it admiringly, and bent to kiss it

before handing it to Edith. I watched as she slowly vacated the room. It was the last time I would see her as she was.

One of our elderly rituals was for Victoria and I to sit at night and read or discuss literature. I think it was her way of shewing a kind of matronly love that had been absent in my childhood. I relished the quiet companionship, something that was absolutely lacking between Edith and myself. And thus I became alarmed when three evenings went by with no sign of Victoria. She had kept up her constant roaming through the woods, an activity that she and Mother shared. I panicked, thinking that my beloved had vanished as suddenly and as mysteriously as Mother had. Yet I said nothing to Edith, who in old age had grown bossy and scolding, treating me as if I were a helpless and stupid child. And so, on that third evening, I found myself climbing the carpeted stairs that led to the second floor and our bedrooms. Bright moonlight streamed through the small hallway window, and I stopped to gaze out at the dark woods. Had I heard a strange drumming in my sleep a few days before? Had I dreamed of pale mauve mist enshrouding the house? Why was I so bizarrely terrified? Moving past the window, I went to my sister's bedroom door and opened it.

The room was cold and damp. Yellow curtains swayed at the widely opened windows. Dim shapes took on solid form, and I studied the furnishings of a room that had obsessed me for decades, but which I had never entered. I noticed the heaps of yellow foolscap that littered much of the floor. My attention was caught by an odd shape that reclined in one dusky corner of the room. Cautiously, I went to it, that pale thing of human form that gave my old heart a violent jolt.

I had no doubt that it was my sister, and that she was dead. But in what had her body been sheathed? Candlelight filtered into the room, and Edith stood beside me. For one silent moment she gazed in puzzlement at our sister's corpse; then she handed me the candlestick, went to the body and knelt beside it. I watched as she

cautiously touched it. Overwhelmed with emotion, I began to weep.

“Be quiet, William. Or if you must make that repulsive noise then leave the room.”

Choking angry words, I went to join her and knelt. I gasped in bewildered horror. The candle’s light revealed that with which my sister’s body was covered. In what must have been a state of insanity, Victoria had pasted her nude flesh with sheets of paper on which she had penned her private verse.

Edith bent and blew out the candle’s flame. I watched as she swayed to and fro, clutching her hair, moving her mouth in a grotesque churning motion. I thought she was going to be sick, but instead she suddenly pressed her mouth to my ear and hummed a haunting tune that was strangely familiar. Edith placed a hand on my chest, just above my heart; her other hand was flung upon the corpse, between the lifeless breasts. I felt the sound before actually hearing it: the heaving throbbing, deep and steady, from somewhere beneath the house. Raising her hands into the air, Edith made strange signals with her tiny fingers. Those dwarfish fingers suddenly moved to me and clutched my startled face. Her eyes were wild and moist with tears. She lunged at me and savagely kissed my mouth. Shocked and revolted, I roughly pushed her from me, spitting the taste of her kiss from my mouth.

Edith cackled as she rose upon her stunted legs. I watched her move in time to the valley’s outlandish heartbeat. Her beckoning hands reached toward an opened window, and I shuddered at the sight of the approaching fog, that unearthly mauve mist that began to spill into the room. I hugged myself as chill windstorm pushed around me. The hearty breeze pushed the pages of Victoria’s verse around the room. I watched those sheets sail to my sister’s corpse and cling to it. I saw those sheets ripple, shining in mauve illumination. Edith’s dancing became frantic and disjointed, and

suddenly she collapsed and fell to her knees.

The thing that had been Victoria slowly rose to its feet as the wind roared and Edith howled fantastic alien words in her raspy voice. That which had been my elder sister opened wide its mouth. In a deep transfigured voice it uttered beautiful poetry as Edith continued to belch her alien language. The room was alive with language. Words seemed to whirl about us in the leaden light. I saw that light pulse with ungodly life, saw it billow and shape itself into a likeness of the sculpture that Edith had christened "Shub-Niggurath". A thousand faces flowed within the pulsation of writhing cloud.

Edith howled like a crazed creature. The sheathed figure towered above her, its rippling flesh capturing the enchanted illumination of the hazy mauve light. It raised its majestic hands to our sister, and I moaned as Edith took hold of one hand and licked its palm. Edith turned to look at me, and for the first time she regarded me with a crazy kind of love. She held to me her free hand in invitation. "Come to us, brother," she wailed. "*Ia!* Come to your destiny! Let us worship her together!"

AFTERWORD

I relish the chance to go over these old tales and touch them up a bit for this edition. Over the decades my vision of Sesqua Valley has become clear, solid, and personal. The valley represents so much that is a part of my psyche. But when I first began to write these stories, the valley was just a place where I could have cool scary stuff happen in the Mythos tradition. I was far more influenced by Derleth and Lumley in the olden days – and happily those days are over. The Mythos still, as this tale shews, has a strong influence over my imagination. Just the fact that this is one of a series of tales in which I pay tribute to one particular Mythos entity is evidence of that. And yet, with these tales, I have tried to keep the Mythos a part of the story’s background, letting it add to the story but not become the main focus.

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