

Whispers In The Mill

By Luke Whaley

"So that's the big bad haunted mill." Bart mumbled to himself.

To his right, jabbing into the night sky behind a vacant lot and a drainage ditch infested with cattails, was the monolithic silhouette of a grain elevator. Two silos stood alongside it, and a metal webwork of pipes led from the grain elevator to another blocky building that was built onto its side. On the other side, a two-story lean-to structure was scabbed onto the main tower of the grain elevator. It was a pile of concrete and rusted metal and spiderweb piping, standing in the back corner of the town like an abandoned stepchild.

He'd heard some little shits talking about the place at a joint called Pixies Games 'N Grub just off of Main Avenue. All the blinky lights and spacey *beep-boops* that yammered from the pinball machines couldn't drown the voices of the threesome that sat at one of the tables out front. They slurped soda from their cups and argued.

"This is the worst idea we've ever had guys." One little guy was saying. He had thick glasses that magnified his eyes, and the frames were too big. He kept readjusting them nervously as he talked.

"Don't be a sissy, Morty," the biggest kid said.

"Nothing's gonna happen, we just want to take some pictures and see what's there."

"Ghosts are what's there!" Glasses kid - Morty - said.

"Exacty. And we're a ghost club. We look for ghosts. Why is this a problem?" The third kid - a calm, sandy-haired one - said.

"But guys... Seriously? Harper Mill? This whole idea is nutty as a Payday. It's private property, anyway! We'd be trespassing."

"We'd be breaking the law, just like in that heavy metal song." the big kid said, and chuckled.

"Besides, it's the only real haunted place we know of, right?" The calm one said. "And it's right here in town. Think of how cool we'll be, man."

"Yeah, if we survive." Morty had said.

The boys had gone on for a few more minutes before the big kid offered to get five bucks worth of tokens to share, and they were back inside staring at the video games.

Harper Mill, the place was. Just off the highway. A big tower. Beautiful, Bart thought. A big, empty industrial building that people avoid. Bring the shadows and mists and all that haunted bullshit to him and he'd piss in its ghostly face. All that garbage meant less than diddly squat. Ghosts couldn't fire guns at you. Ghosts couldn't torture you. For a quiet, dry place to sleep, Bart had figured he would use a ghost as a blanket if he had to.

Now, here it was.

An old sign stood at the roadside. Most of the letters had fallen off years ago but the words *Harper Mill* were permanently stained into the sign by the weather. It was riddled with nicks and holes and places where wet things - eggs, Bart thought - had been flung at the sign and exploded, and then dried to the face of it in crusted streaks. Beyond the sign was an overgrown meadow and past that, the concrete tower of the grain elevator, it's one window near the top staring over the highway.

"I ain't sweatin' you big boy." Bart said to the tower. To hammer the point home, he flipped the bird at the black window. The window stared back like a dead eye.

Bart picked his way through waist high weeds. A drainage ditch ran alongside the railroad tracks and he sloshed his way through it, almost losing his one good shoe as he did so. When he'd made it across, Bart stepped up the side of the gravel bank that formed the railroad bed, and hobbled across the tracks. Wind whispered through the weed stalks and cattails along the edge of the drainage ditch. Bart's eyes twitched. He tilted his head to the wind and waited for the breeze to die out. By the time it had dissipated he'd realized his eyes were closed. Not just closed, but squeezed shut.

"Mama," he'd heard whispered in the breeze. "I seen mama."

Bart shook his head, holding his eyes shut.

"Shut up Hap." Bart said. "You ain't seen your mama. 'Less she's dead too." He grunted a half chuckle at that, though there was no happiness in it.

He opened his eyes. The tower loomed over him. The further back he tilted his head, the further forward the tower seemed to lean as if it were about to fall over and squish him beneath it. He felt dizzy.

Something moved in the window above. A flutter of unease played in his gut for a second, then drowned.

"That you ol' boy? You lookin' to snipe me?"

No answer came to Bart, and he didn't expect one.

"It ain't you Hap." He said. "An' if it is, come on down and play some cards with me. Don't matter that you're a ghost, 'less you can see through my cards."

Bart smiled and made his way to the mill.

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He'd had a hell of a time finding a way in. Greedy bastards like to lock their places up tight, Bart thought, even if nobody ever goes in them no more. By the light of the moon he finally saw a door at the top of a set of stairs. Looked like an emergency exit. The metal stairs were painted yellow but diseased with a bad case of rust. Bart had climbed the stairs and tried the door handle. It was locked. The door jamb, though, was made of wood and looked weathered and rotten so he stepped back, lifted his knee, and slammed his foot into the door. It flung open and slammed against the interior wall, causing a shotgun blast to echo through the innards of the building.

He made his way through the mill by the glow of his lighter, and eventually he'd found a corner in one of the side buildings that must have been a store room. He picked a spot near a window so that he'd have at least some light from the half moon. No need to waste lighter fluid if he didn't have to. Besides, the darkness suited him just fine. He'd lived for almost a year in the darkness before.

Bart unloaded the pack from his shoulders, and his back reminded him that he'd overdone it by sending flames of pain from his ass to his shoulder blades whenever he moved. He gritted his teeth as he unpacked his blanket and the jacket he used as a pillow. Backing up to the

corner of the room, Bart placed one hand flat against both walls and used the walls as leverage to lower himself to a seated position beside his pack. He searched his bag until he'd found the can of sardines he'd bought with his last fifty cents and ate as slowly as he could. When the bits of fish were all gone he held the can to his mouth and slurped from it, using his tongue to mop up any juices he might have missed.

It didn't take long to get to sleep despite shifting constantly to settle the ache in his back. He'd walked a good ten miles today, from just south of Decatur to the town of Helens Bluff, and though it was late September the Alabama sun had beaten on his neck and shoulders and his balding head like it was mid July. Bart had been drained by the time he'd laid his head on the wadded up jacket, pulled the blanket over his shoulders, and closed his eyes.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep before he'd heard the thrumming.

He'd been in the middle of a nightmare. He was in the hole again, the smell of shit and sweat suffocating his lungs, the nuzzle and pinch of leech mouths on his ankles and shins. Hap murmured from a corner. "Bacon. Smell bacon. You got bacon, B?" Then came chewing, sucking sounds. "Mmm..." Hap said from his corner. In his dream, Bart looked over. He could see his friend eating something, and he was jealous.

"What you got?" Bart asked Hap.

The door above them swung open, spilling light into the pit. He could hear the Cong laughing. One of them dumped a bucket of leeches on Bart's head, and Bart winced and let the slimy things slide down his naked back and shoulders.

"Bacon." Hap murmured, and when Bart looked over at him, seeing Hap from the overhead light before it banged shut again, He saw Hap with his own blackened thumb in his mouth. Hap's teeth clamped down at the palm and pulled, scraping the flesh of his thumb into his mouth as if he were eating the last bit of a corn dog on a stick. Bart caught vomit in his throat when he saw each of Hap's fingers on that hand had been stripped in the same fashion, down to the bone, and he thought he actually did smell bacon.

That's when the thrumming began.

In his dream that thrumming was a Huey swooping in to liberate him from the POW camp. The vibrations in the floor woke him, though, and for a minute he didn't realize he'd come out of his dream. He'd vomited on the floor of Harper Mill, and he lifted his head out of the drying puddle. Though his vision was muddy with sleep he could make out a blurred glow coming from the doorway to the room he'd slept in. The glow dimmed and shifted as something moved among the light.

A sound came from some distant room. Bart was still blinking the dream from his eyes, and the sound that came to him half clung to the image in his mind of dark jungles and strange animals that harped and cooed and shrieked from the treetops in that savage land all those years ago. The sound was a deep throated cackle. He thought of loons in the ancient forests of the northwest.

The cackling echoed off the concrete walls in the main chamber. The sound was followed by a gargantuan *BANG!...BANG!...BANG!THWAP!BANG!* Bart shook his head, trying to clear his mind, but the banging kept on. He could feel tremors in the floor beneath him.

*THWAP!*

When he was a boy his father used to take him catfishing. Once he'd hooked a seven pounder, and when his dad helped him drag the big bastard onto the boat they dropped the fish into a bucket and it thrashed and smacked the sides until it finally stopped moving. That flopping and slapping sound reminded Bart of what he was hearing now, only now it was like a humpback whale was doing the flopping, and the bucket was the floor of this mill. No matter how out of place that sounded, Bart was sure that if he could stand right now and look through the door he would see a huge, wet sea monster flopping around on the floor of Harper Mill.

His back would not permit movement, though.

It would take a good twenty minutes in the morning for him to work his body into a sitting position. This damned concrete floor wasn't helping either. He held himself up with his hands flat on the floor. A lump in the concrete had poked his ribs all through the night. He'd shimmied over at some point, he was sure of it because he'd had to rebundle his jacket-pillow, but the lump somehow found his ribs again later in the night.

Another cackle strained from a distance that seemed a mile away. The thrum, which felt the vibrations of electric hair clippers on his palms, began to peter out. There was one final *THWAP!* on a wall or floor somewhere in the mill, the glow from the doorway sputtered, and the thrum ceased as if its power cord was yanked from the socket. Bart looked to his left and right. Moonlight stained the darkness, but did little to combat the shadows that all but enveloped the store room. Eventually the silence settled over the mill, and Bart felt his muscles ease.

"I seen mama." Something whispered in the far corner of the storeroom.

"Fuck you Hap," Bart said with his face in his jacket-pillow. He did not look in the corner. Eventually he fell asleep.

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Bart awoke to the sound of birdsong. Sunlight streamed through the broken windows and stabbed his eyes, instantly causing him to squeeze them shut. As his vision adjusted, Bart's mind wandered to the events of last night. It was hazy. Hap had been there, he remembered, and some lights and sounds from things he never got to see. Nothing too special. He saw Hap at least once a month, and that had gone on since '69. Bart supposed he'd never stop seeing his old friend. Even in the afterlife when he'd went to hell as he was certain he would, he'd probably hear Hap whispering from the corner of whatever torture chamber he'd be hanging in.

But for now, hell could wait. Maybe if he got up and got moving he could scrounge up some breakfast somehow. He could hear cars on the main highway. All those people out there, gotta be a few of them with spare change. His back screaming in protest, Bart began the long, slow process of standing up.

He was pushing himself off the concrete when he saw the finger. Just below him a petrified thumb was lodged in the floor, the knob of its knuckle jutting from the surface like a tiny island in a cement sea. Something had been gouging his rib cage last night, he remembered. His breath came to a halt in his throat. He stared at the thing, half expecting it to move. Was the rest of the body beneath the concrete?

Suddenly the paralysis broke and Bart scrambled as fast as he could to his feet, gritting his teeth through the jolts of pain in his back. He moved too quickly and his spine popped. A

scream caught in his throat. He grunted his way through it, and finally made it to his feet and stood for a few minutes while he waited for the pain to ebb to a dull ache. His eyes held on the blackened nub in the floor.

The room grew dark. At first he thought a cloud moved in and dimmed the glare of sunlight that streamed through the broken windows. The color had gone from warm honey to a brooding blue-gray, from morning to a stormy afternoon.

And it felt like afternoon.

Can't be right, Bart thought. The sun was shining through the windows from the east just two minutes ago. Birds were singing. He paused for a moment and listened.

No birds. No cars. Just a rustling wind that tossed shadows on the opposing wall. When had it changed? His eyes wandered to the floor, back to the cause for his panicked scramble to stand. The thumb was gone. A smooth plate of concrete, littered with old grain, remained.

A shriek tore through the trees outside, followed by laughter from what sounded like a young man. Bart twitched. His eyes darted towards the sound. For a brief moment he remembered the cackle he'd heard in the middle of the night, and wanted nothing more than to be outside of this building and miles down the road, away from it all.

A teenage girl emerged from the forest wearing a floral sundress. Long, straight hair the color of hay bounced and flopped on her shoulders and breasts as the girl ran. She made it into the clearing surrounding the mill (had the grass been that short last night?) and a young man stumbled from the brush behind her, chasing after the woman with a grin on his bearded face. His clothes looked like something Bart would've worn in high school before he was drafted into the service. Old jeans, swelled open at the ankles. A t-shirt striped in earth tones. His hair was dark and wavy, and fluttered at shoulder length as he caught up with the girl and pulled her to the ground.

Bart felt the old hot rain in his stomach. The rain of fire. His body telling him he was about to fight, whether he wanted to or not. In his mind Bart went to a village in Vietnam, the name of which he couldn't remember, with Hap and Porter and Don all taking their turn with a fourteen-year-old Vietnamese prostitute in the back of an alley while her pimp laughed and cut up with his platoon at the storefront.

"Khe Sahn." a voice whispered behind him. "The town was Khe Sahn."

"Fuck you." Bart said without turning.

After Don and Porter had gone, Bart remembered, Hap was up. The girl was screaming as Porter finished with her, and the rain of fire lit in Bart's stomach as the screeches tore at his ear canals. Bart had called the pimp over and told him the whole thing was off. Hap had thought otherwise. A fistfight ensued between Bart and his friends, and the girl was able to run off while they brawled. Bart received a black eye, a knot on the back of his head, and a scatter of bruises across his ribcage that day.

"We caught her again a week later," the voice whispered. "Finished our business."

Bart's eyes clenched shut at the grating whisper sound.

Through the window he could see the couple on the grass kissing. It looked like the woman wasn't fighting after all, Bart saw. The man held her hands playfully to the grass, and the girl hooked her legs around the back of the man's knees. Bart's stomach clenched, the hot rain turning to something else. Some other form of heat.

He hadn't been with a woman in three years. Hadn't seen a naked tit in just as long, except for in a few mags he'd found in a dumpster some time ago. Bart crept closer to the window, his groin now on fire and his stomach boiling.

"Shoulda watched us do our business back in Khe Sahn." Hap whispered from the corner behind him. "It was some more hot! Hotter than those two hippies."

Bart's teeth gritted.

Outside, thunder tumbled through the clouds. Wind kicked up. Tiny raindrops tapped a slow, irregular beat on the cracked window in front of Bart.

"I seen mama." Hap said, and his voice was a little louder this time. "I seen mama after I tasted mud and shit, B." And all at once Hap's voice was so close it tickled Bart's ear.

He whirled around.

At first all Bart saw was an empty storeroom doused in shadow. He heard the girl giggle behind him and began to turn back to the action, but movement caused his feet to scrape the concrete as he froze. In the corner a muddy shape rose to a standing position.

Bart shook his head. "You ain't nothing Hap. I'll blink and you'll be gone, back inside my head for tomorrow."

The figure stepped forward. Its face swam in the shifting blue light from the windows. Half of Hap's face was gone. Leeches sucked at one eye socket, and mud caked his forehead and cheeks and bits of exposed skull near his jaw. A coat of leeches clung to his neck like a second skin, making Hap appear black and slimy. Some of them shifted and bubbled beneath his fatigues.

Bart stepped back. The hot rain in his stomach had gone cold. An ice cold hail of fear, hammering his insides. Every time he'd seen Hap since he'd been liberated from that hellhole in Vietnam, Hap had looked like Hap. He'd been wounded, sure. Burnt to hell and back, even, but he looked alive. Bart had seen his old friend for the past sixteen years, but he'd held onto enough of his sanity to know that Hap wasn't really there. Now, this skull with swamp-bloated skin staring at him, his dead friend seemed undeniably real.

"Need a band-aid, B." Hap croaked, and a blob of mud oozed from his lips. "Call me in a band-aid."

"Like I said, friend," Bart sidestepped the corpse, "fuck you."

He shuffled quickly for the doorway, his back screeching in protest with every step. Still he moved faster than he'd moved in a long time. There was a tickle on the hairs of his neck telling him that if he were to turn around at any point Hap would be there to fill his nose and mouth with mud and shit and leeches.

Bart exited the store room where he'd slept and hobbled into the main chamber of the mill, where four colossal grain funnels pressed down from the ceiling twenty feet above. His footsteps clapped on the gritty concrete, causing echoes to lap at the walls. He hurried, but he was painfully slow and the echoes of his own footsteps mingled with the shambling of his dead friend.

He was really there. Bart had never been so sure of anything in his life.

"B." The thing called. "Where you at B? I need help. I seen mama, B, and she was cryin' her tits off 'cause I was dead."

Bart felt his way through the darkness, illuminated only by a faint glow the source of which he couldn't determine. Ahead was the black skeleton of a staircase, and Bart crept towards it.

"You let me die, B." Hap called out.

Bart's hand found the railing and then he began to climb.

"You could've lifted my head. You could've helped me."

Bart reached the top of the stairs and stepped onto the gangway he'd been on when he'd broken in last night.

"Instead you let me drown in the mud. Guess you wanted all the scraps for yourself." Hap said. His voice was everywhere. In Bart's mind Hap was already on the gangway with him, shuffling his rotted feet towards the exit right along with Bart.

Bart moved closer to the door, and when he got there and went to pull it open, it held fast. He tried again with the same result, thinking it must've gotten stuck on the warped jamb. It didn't budge. He reached up and his hands found the cold hard metal of a padlock.

Bart clenched his eyes shut. His hands jittered on the rails of the walkway. His palms coated the rails in sweat, making rust cling to his fingers. The rails were vibrating. The grated floor of the gangway buzzed too, and his ears picked out the distant thrumming sound he'd heard and felt on the concrete floor the night before.

Tremors came through the grated floor. Footsteps. Hap was on the gangway with him.

"Slow," he whispered to himself. Steady." He concentrated on his breathing. He thought of his old bedroom at home when he was a kid, his village built with Lincoln Logs in the corner of his room, his stack of Hardy Boys books on a little table he used as a desk beside his bedroom door. He thought of lying there on a Saturday morning during summer, thinking of all the things he'd do that day. He thought of banging Betty Hornton in the backseat of his dad's '67 Dodge Charger. He hadn't known what he was doing, and it only lasted a couple of minutes, but it was the best thing he'd ever felt. That had been just a few weeks before he'd joined the service.

"Slow," a voice whispered. "Steady."

Bart jerked against the door.

The rhythmic cadence of footsteps stopped.

"I taught you that didn't I?" Hap said. "Think of something calming. Fill your mind with peace, ignore the pain."

Bart did not turn around. He pressed his head against the door and squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't move. The cold fire was boring through him, fanning fear to every extremity and freezing him solid. Tremors in his hands caused the door handle which he was grasping to rattle against the frame.

Hap's breath was on his neck. "Did you do that while I was dying, B? Did you think of Betty Hornton's tits or your baseball card collection or your summers at the camp in Jersey?"

Bart did not turn around. Had he turned around, he'd have seen that Hap was not there.

Had he turned around, he'd have seen something else sagging from the open grain funnel above him. His fear exuded a barrage of vibrations that surrounded the thing. It swam in the terror that swelled and retracted with the thump of Bart's heart. Slowly, it pulled darkness from its surroundings and moulded itself into being. Images flashed through its consciousness. Images from the quivering man's mind. Memories. It willed the man's vibrations into shapes, and the little man covered from them. The resulting burst of vibration washed over the entity,



and it was home. It pulled more darkness into itself. It needed the little man. It needed to bask in his frequency, if only for a little while.

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“Well, shit.” Ronnie said.

Shelly pushed his shoulders up. “Let’s get inside!”

Ronnie rolled off of her and scrambled to his feet as the rain began to come down harder. She stood, allowing her sundress to fall down to her knees. Her legs were shaky and her heart was hammering. She trotted behind Ronnie towards the mill. Ronnie looked like a hunchbacked duck as he ran while pulling up his pants, his head dipped low as if that would shield his hair from the rain. Shelly chuckled.

They rounded a corner and found a set of double doors. Locked, as Shelly expected. Ronnie whipped out his knife and a piece of wire he’d kept in his pocket and worked the key slot in the door knob. He’d always been good at picking locks. She felt a ripple of admiration for him as, within seconds, he jiggled the handle with the knife and wire wedged inside and the door popped open. He held the door open and she rushed through. Rain dripped from her hair and clothes onto the dusty concrete floor. Ronnie nudged her on through and stepped in himself.

The rain drummed a deep white noise on the tin roofs. It intensified a moment after the two had stepped into the open cavern of the main floor. It echoed through the chamber, scattering the sound of constant thunder through the bowels of the mill.

There were precious few light sources inside, and those windows that provided it threw muted shafts that did little to hold the darkness at bay. Ronnie pulled out his lighter and flicked it on.

“Hellooooo!” He called. His voice echoed.

Shelly slapped his arm, causing a quiver in the glow from his lighter. “Shut up! What if there’s a psycho in here or something.” The last two nights they’d spent on the road had awakened Shelly to the realization that there were some unsavory people in this world. Worse still, she was discovering, Ronnie seemed to fit right in with them. She was starting to admit to herself that she was homesick, that maybe running away with Ronnie for the west coast was a dumb idea. She missed the steady security of her bedroom, of her high school friends, of her little town in east Marietta.

“More likely ghosts.” Ronnie said, and made a whisper of the word ghosts. “Don’t wanna scare the ghosts.” She could see him smile in the cocoon of light that surrounded them. “RIGHT?” He shouted, and the words echoed again.

She slapped him again, harder this time. “Shut up dude!”

“Chill out Shel. Jeez, act like you’ve never been in an abandoned building before.”

Shelly hadn’t, in fact. The most abandoned building she’d ever been in before was her grandpa’s barn back in Marietta, and it had only been abandoned a couple of months when she and her parents had gone to the old man’s estate to settle some things after he’d died. She’d wandered in there and had immediately been intimidated by the thick shadows, the stillness that was too quiet, the feeling that there was an eye on her from somewhere in a dark stall or in the hay loft above. She felt that disquiet again, amplified times a hundred.

The only difference were the storms. The rain was a blunt wall of sound that drowned out the stillness. Shelly's senses were on high alert. Her ears tried to pick out variations in the sound: a scrape of a foot on the concrete, whispers from squatters, a rustle in a sleeping bag. All she heard, though, was the thunder of rain on tin roofs. It was a constant thrum. She could feel it even in the floor beneath her loafers.

"How old you think this place is?" Ronnie asked.

"No idea." She said.

"I'm gettin' a real weird vibe from it."

"Yeah, me too."

"Wait!" Ronnie hissed, and the flame from his lighter fluttered as he jolted to a stop. She bumped into him, causing the light to jitter again. "You hear that?"

"The rain?"

"Shh! Listen."

Pinpricks of fear swept over her skin. His voice had an immediacy to it, and Shelly was certain she'd heard a quiver of fear.

"What'd you hear?" She whispered.

"LISTEN!" Ronnie insisted.

Silence.

Then, a sound. *BBBRAP!*

Ronnie exploded with laughter.

"Are you kidding me? You thought now was a good time to fart?" Shelly said, and pounded on his back with her fists. "You pig!"

Ronnie shrugged.

"Might need to kill the lighter so we don't go up in flames with all that gas floatin' around." She regretted saying it the minute it came out of her mouth, because she knew what was going to happen next. And sure enough, it did.

Ronnie released the button on the lighter. Instantly the two were submerged in near total darkness.

She slapped him again a few times. "Turn the fucking light on you moron."

"You asked for it babe."

"Turn it on now or I kick you in the nuts." She said.

"Oooh I might be into that."

"Trust me, you won't be." She said, and kicked the back of his calf as a warning.

"Yeeow!" Ronnie said, and she heard him hopping as he yelped. "Okay okay." He said. "Such a bitch sometimes." He fumbled with his lighter. Shelly heard the *phht!* sound of the lighter's flint wheel being stricken.

"Sweet Jesus!" Ronnie yelped. "Hotter than a thousand dollar hooker!"

"Turn it on man."

"It's gotta cool down first. Burns like a sonofabitch!"

Great, Shelly thought. Every minute she spent with Ronnie seemed to reinforce the growing uncertainty she'd had about this whole thing. A realization settled over her like nightfall: she was not going to California with Ronnie. There was no way this was ever going to work. He'd promised her an amazing time, hitchhiking across the country and seeing all the sights on their

way to paradise and free love in San Francisco or L.A., and here they were hunkered in the dark in an abandoned feed mill in the middle of Nowhere, Alabama. Some fucking adventure.

In the darkness, a sound came to her. Shelly held her breath. She wanted to ask Ronnie if he heard it but he'd probably say something stupid, so she just listened. It was a metallic rattling sound, barely audible over the noise of the rain. The rain, though, was letting up somewhat, and as it did the sound grew. It was hard to tell where it came from, but it was somewhere in the main chamber.

"Turn on the light." She said to Ronnie.

"Nope. Still burns."

"Give it to me then," she said and ripped the lighter from his hand. He didn't resist.

Shelly winced as she flicked the flint wheel and the heat from it bit into her thumb. The lighter sputtered to life. She saw nothing but Ronnie and the concrete floor, and something straight ahead that, as she drew closer, Shelly discovered was a metal staircase. Partly out of curiosity, and partly because she wanted to get away from the asshole she was traveling with, she started up the stairs.

The steps were grated, allowing her to see through them to the floor below. The lighter cast fitful shadows around her. It threw distorted versions of the handrails and steps onto the wall and floor, and the shadows swam as she moved with the lighter held in front of her.

"Wait on me." Ronnie whined, and clanged up the stairs behind her.

At the top of the staircase was a landing that opened onto a walkway made of the same grated metal as the steps. It stretched into the darkness, and must have spanned the entire width of the mill's main floor. Shelly moved down the gangway towards the rattling sound. Above her was a large, black hole from a funnel in the ceiling. There was something supremely unnerving about that gaping hole, and she wanted to be clear of it as quickly as she could be. It pressed down over her. She picked up her pace to put it behind her.

"Like a big mouth, huh?" Ronnie said.

"Yeah," she answered, and realized that's exactly what she thought too.

The sound she'd heard before they climbed the steps was growing louder. Ahead, another giant funnel loomed over them and she unconsciously crouched a bit as she passed beneath it. The metallic jittering sound was just ahead, now. She was sure of it.

After a dozen more steps the walkway ended at the far wall. To the left was a short bridge that broke toward the wall a few feet to their left. It led to a door. Through the murky light she could see the rectangular outline of the door, and she knew that was the source of the rattling sound. Another step closer, and a figure emerged from the darkness, standing completely still at the door except for their hand, which grasped the handle and shook as if the person were being electrocuted.

"Oh shit, do you see this?" Shelly whispered.

"Oh, it's just a dude." Ronnie said in his normal voice, but it sounded way too loud in the silence that had befallen the mill. "Hey man, got any food or grass?"

She grabbed Ronnie's bicep and squeezed hard. "Shut. Up." She growled. "There's something wrong with him." She murmured.

"You don't say." Ronnie said, and chuckled.

Shelly kept her hand on Ronnie's arm so the jerk didn't try to go talk to the crazy dude. She thought for a minute, and then said, "Hey man, you okay?"

The man's shaking grew stronger. It sounded like the door handle was going to shake to pieces in his hand.

"Hey, do you need help man?" Ronnie offered.

The man whispered over and over to himself. She couldn't tell what he was saying.

Shelly noticed then that it was getting darker. Oh God, she thought, the lighter's running out of juice! The thought of being stuck in this place in pitch darkness with a random stranger that seemed out of his mind was not what she signed up for when she'd left her home behind. She took a step back. When she did, the light got brighter. Shelly looked up, and saw something like a dark cloud hung a few feet above the gangway. It was not a shadow, it was a black mist that dimmed her light when she'd stepped into it.

It had a substance to it.

While she watched, the ball of darkness shifted. It moved like a flock of crows changing direction. The shape formed more clearly the more she watched. It was drifting towards the man at the door.

"You see this shit?" Ronnie asked.

Shelly nodded, but was unable to speak.

"Hey dude, you might want to move from there." Ronnie called to the man. The man held onto the door, whispering his unknown mantra as the darkness closed in around him.

"Fuck this, I'm outta here." Ronnie said.

Shelly couldn't run. She heard the clang of Ronnie's footsteps as he trotted down the gangway. "Shelly come on!" He called. "I need my light." His voice echoed in the darkness.

Shelly was frozen. Tendril-like arms had protruded from the dark blob. They reached for the man at the door, and sunk into him.

"HNNNNG!" The man grunted. His body quaked, his ratty clothes rustling as if in a breeze. The tendril-arms flexed inside the man and pushed deeper into his body.

"SLOW... STEADY!" The man called. "SSSSSLOW, STEADDDDY!"

A bulbous head emerged in the dark cloud. Two eyes the size of bowling balls materialized in different shades of gray and black. The facial features were obscured, still forming. In its eyes, though, Shelly thought she could see something like lust or obsession. Its arms were inside the man, and hardening their form in the same manner as its knotted head.

"SLOW, STEADY, SLOOOOOWWWW" The man wailed, and the creature's arm escaped from inside his mouth, cutting off his screams.

The black arm solidified. What Shelly was now looking at was a half formed monster melded with some poor hobo, and the black thing was doing God knows what to the man's insides as it flexed and pulled.

The man let go of the door handle. The thing floated backward. The man drifted through the air in its grasp, his body shaking and his lips trying to make words around an extremity that pushed out of his mouth, forcing his jaw open farther and farther until Shelly heard a series of pops as his jawbone was shattered and the ligaments snapped like old rubber bands. Blood streamed from his lips and soaked into his army jacket. The thing's bulk pushed through the man's mouth. His neck began to swell and deform until his skin split with a sound like ripping

wet fabric. The rip continued down his chest, opening the man's body as he gave birth to the monstrous thing that gripped him and writhed beneath his skin. He floated upward with the half formed creature. His body was torn nearly in half by the time he disappeared into the grain funnel overhead. The darkness of the hole seemed to suck the floating mass into it. A few scrapes and rustles echoed from inside the hole, and there was a steady *patter* of blood hitting the floor below the gangway. Silence followed and Shelly stared, unable to move. Something metallic fell from the gaping hole and clinked onto the floor below, and the sound somehow jolted her into action. Shelly ran. The lighter whipped and threatened to go out. She scampered down the stairwell as quickly as she could, and ran for the only exit she knew.

Something hit her on the head as she ran across the concrete. Shelly screamed and raked her fingers through her hair. The object was hard and stringy, and slick with blood. She shook her head from side to side, ripping the thing from her hair as she ran to the exit. The door stood open. She went for the light and burst through the doorway at the same time she pulled the string from her hair. She scurried farther away from the mill and sat for a minute in the grass trying to catch her breath.

Shelly looked down at what she'd pulled from her hair, and in her hand was a necklace. There was a small metal paddle strung through the chain, and she remembered her dad telling her what they were. Usually there were two of them with the same information stamped on them. It was a dog tag. It was warped and dented, and there was a tear in its side. She read the name stamped into it:

BRYSON  
BART R.  
O POS  
CHRISTIAN

Shelly turned the tag over in her hands, studying it. There should've been two of these, she remembered. Her dad had taught her that too. One for the soldier to be buried with, the other to go home to his family. The other one, she figured when she remembered the clanging sound she'd heard as the man was pulled into the grain funnel, was lying on the Mill's floor.

A cackling erupted from the depths of the mill, reaching her ears from the open doorway ten yards away. She stood and trotted away from the mill, and as she got closer to the road the cackling faded away. It was the sound of a bird, she thought, but she was taking no chances.

She called for Ronnie a few times, but Ronnie was long gone. Good, she thought. It saved a fight. Let him go to California on his own. She could think of nothing now but her own bedroom.

Shelly stopped by the roadside and held her thumb out. A driver stopped.

"Where to, hon?" The old man said.

"East," Shelly said, "Marietta, Georgia."