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YEAR'S BEST
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HORROR

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THE VILLAGE

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That was the first I ever heard of shadowed Innsmouth. Any reference to a town not shown on common map or listed in recent guidebooks would have interested me, and the agent's odd manner of allusion roused something like real curiosity. A town able to inspire such dislike in its neighbors, I thought, must be at least rather unusual, and worthy of a tourist's attention.

—H. P. Lovecraft, *"The Shadow Over Innsmouth"*

Near the end of 1928 I decided to take a short vacation in a remote island off the coast of Africa. After three days of touring all over the island and seeing every point of interest, I set my aim at a small village I could see atop a tall hill across the bay.

The nasty remarks by the people at the resort in response to my inquiries surprised and egged me on. I was irritated by the way the townsfolk made fun of a tourist for asking about the village. "That pimple on the butt of the world?" "Why are you asking about it?" "It's trash, just a bunch of lowlifes rutting in hovels like swine." "You shouldn't waste your time going to that dump, really."

A shopkeeper took me aside and whispered in my ear: “There are stories of people who went there and haven’t been seen again.”

Despite the taunting, as I looked from the balcony of my hotel room the village did not seem trashy at all—a cluster of whitewashed cottages with red tile roofs at the foot of a high hill, shimmering in the morning sunshine. The view of the bay from the top of that hill should be nice and would be worth a visit, as I had already taken enough pictures of every other corner of the island and still had two days left of my vacation. So, I decided to ignore the negative comments and go investigate.

Getting to Los Juanes (that was the name of the village) was not easy. There was apparently no bus service, so I decided to make it a day-long excursion and got on my rented bicycle, hoping to burn off some of the extra weight I had put on from too many cocktails. A dirt road spurted from the outskirts of town and seemed to meander aimlessly for miles before turning eastwardly and beginning to climb. After two hours of pedaling, I was exhausted, but I pressed on until I reached the foot of the hill that I had seen from across the bay. The hill was too steep for me to climb on the bicycle, so I leaned it against a centenary oak and proceeded on foot.

I was near the summit when two men emerged from the woods. They were dressed in outdoors clothes and wore plaid caps that covered their ears. Each carried what appeared to be an antique hunting rifle. Next to them circled three menacing-looking hounds.

I was startled by the sudden appearance of the men, but greeted them: “Good morning, gentlemen. Nice day, isn’t

it?”

“Hello” responded one of the men, curtly. “What brings you to these parts?”

“Oh, nothing much. I came to see the view of the bay from this hill and check out the town.”

The man grimaced. “It may not be a good idea for you to go into Los Juanes.”

“Why not?”

“We’ve come from town chasing a fox that was seen acting suspiciously and may be rabid. She’s probably somewhere around here but may have doubled back and could be lurking anywhere.”

“Will it be safe for me to go to the top of the hill and snap a few pictures?”

The second man replied with the same brusqueness: “You are safe if you stay around only a few minutes, but after that you should leave.”

“Alright” I agreed, disappointed. I continued climbing the steep path, and after a few minutes I reached a ledge from which I could see the bay and the town from which I had come.

The view was outstanding. It was the afternoon of a partly cloudy day, and the cottages and mansions were suffused in a golden light that rendered every feature a bit magical. Even my hotel, a utilitarian box of no architectural interest, resembled a wedding cake festooned with bright

rectangles as the light bounced off closed windows. I took several pictures and would have gone for more, but I realized it was getting late and it would not have been wise to linger.

As I turned around to leave, I glanced back and, out of the corner of my eye, caught a glimpse of a figure that was too large to be a fox. It was erect and moved quickly, so I lost sight of it almost at once, but not before I was able to get the distinct impression that it was human, but not quite so. I became somewhat alarmed and accelerated my downhill progress.

I returned to the spot where I had left my bicycle and began making a quick return to town. As daylight faded, I accelerated my downhill pedaling, until suddenly I struck a deep pothole on the road and was thrown over the bicycle, which careened and collided with the trunk of a tree. I got several painful bruises, but the bicycle fared much worse: the front wheel was cracked and had collapsed.

After a bit of cursing, I stopped to consider my situation. Walking back to my hotel would be treacherous since, once it got dark, I would not be able to see the ground ahead of me and could trip on a hole or a stone and take another nasty fall. After pondering options for a while, I decided to brave the fox and give Los Juanes a try. I would look there for an inn or some other place to spend the night.

The village was a disappointment. The town's only street was unpaved; with every step I took, clouds of dust were released into the air. Most houses were one-floor stucco cottages in various stages of disrepair; some were missing roof tiles, others exhibited large wall cracks; the white paint

covering the plaster was peeling off of many. I searched in vain for a tavern where I could make inquiries and perhaps grab some food; hotels, inns or other public accommodations were conspicuously absent. This was a town that made no provisions for visitors.

I had made a circuit around Los Juanes and was approaching a road that led away, towards the mountains farther to the east, when I noticed what appeared to be a small church tucked away at the end of an alley, hiding as if ashamed of the poverty of its parishioners. Unlike the rest of the town, the white stucco building was in reasonable shape, all its Spanish clay tiles firmly planted on the roof, no cracks or stains in evidence. There was no cross, but a small tower on top of the structure held an iron bell that presumably would ring to call the faithful to prayer.

I approached the building reluctantly, for I am not a religious person, but this seemed like the only possible way for me to get help. The door, made of dark wood, was covered with carvings whose nature I could not discern. I pressed on the door, and it creaked as it yielded. Without hesitation, I pushed it open all the way and walked in.

It was, and yet was not, a church. There was an empty altar, devoid of decorations, at the end of a long, narrow nave. Stained glass windows on opposite walls let in the failing afternoon light, imprinting it with a multitude of colors; there were no candles or artificial lights adding illumination to the scene. Pews had been removed and replaced by fourteen armchairs set in a circle around a large wooden table. No images of saints, pictures or other decorations were set on the walls or on the tiled floors.

As I was examining the strange arrangement, a side door

opened behind the altar and from it emerged a very old man wearing an ankle-length cassock. He advanced haltingly, as if fighting pain; in his right hand he carried a lit taper resting in a bronze holder. The flame from the taper wavered, as the man's grip seemed unsteady.

The man stopped a few steps from me and waved me to approach the table in the center of the room. He motioned me to sit on one of the armchairs and deposited himself gingerly on another, two seats away. "What can I do for you, son?" He inquired in a grating voice that resembled the rasping of branches in the autumn wind.

"Father, I found myself in this village by accident and need to get a place to spend the night before returning to my hotel across the bay. Can you help me find shelter?"

The old man was silent for a long moment. "That's a problem" he started. "This is a poor village which seldom sees visitors. We have no public accommodations, and the people here do not take well to strangers."

"What can I do, then? Sleep on the ground outdoors?"

The man must have noticed the rising panic on my voice. He replied: "No, that would not be advisable ..." He then added, with obvious reluctance, "I suppose you could stay here until tomorrow ... I could set up a cot in the sacristy ..."

"Oh, thank you, thank you. I promise I'll be gone by dawn."

"You can stay, on one condition."

"Anything."

“You must remain in the sacristy all night and not come to this room, no matter what you hear.”

I blanched at the strange request and the stern manner of its delivery but nodded in agreement.

The man rose with an effort from the armchair. “Have you eaten?”

“No. I couldn’t find any restaurant or tavern.”

“Follow me. I may have some food in the sacristy.”

We went through the door behind the altar into a dark room, much of which was occupied by a cabinet with many drawers, presumably containing vestments and other liturgical objects. There were two long tapers lit on a candelabrum on top of the cabinet, casting random shadows on the room as they flickered in a slight breeze coming from somewhere up high. The rest of the room held a lavatory, a table holding a large missal, and a bell over the door that would alert the congregation of the advent of the clergy. A small window near the ceiling let in the light of the early stars.

The man opened a closet and pulled out a folding cot, which after opening occupied almost all the empty space in the room. “Here” he pronounced. “I’ll bring you sheets and a blanket in a minute. In the meantime, have this.” He opened the top drawer of the cabinet and took out a heel of stale bread, an ancient looking chunk of salami redolent of coriander, and a flask of red wine.

I was reluctant at first to partake of the dubious goods but, all of a sudden, I felt an acute flash of hunger and set

aside my qualms. As I began devouring the food, the old man went out by another door and returned after a while with a cushion to serve as a pillow, two sheets, and a blanket. "Help yourself," he instructed. "Good night." Without giving me time to express my thanks for his hospitality, he turned around and left the same way he had come.

The food was barely edible, the wine tasted sour and, as I lay on the cot, its thin mattress provided no support for my aching back. No matter. All of a sudden, I was dead tired and, as night fell, I slipped into a deep slumber.

* * *

Much later, I woke up with a start. The tapers in the candelabrum were burning low, and the sacristy seemed much darker than when I fell asleep, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Then I heard it: the bell over the door was tinkling loudly, as if an invisible hand was beckoning the faithful to a ceremony.

I approached the rebellious bell with trepidation, my heart drumming a fast tattoo inside my chest. As I reached for it, the sound ceased. Deep silence returned and I took a deep breath, relieved. My pocket watch read three thirty a.m., so I turned back towards the cot to resume my rest.

No sooner had I lay down, indistinct noises began filtering through the closed door, coming from the nave. At first, I heard the shuffling of feet, then the scraping of furniture as it moved over the floor tiles. Finally, a murmur like voices began rising—initially at random, and then in unison as if reciting some prayer. Then there was the sound of the old man, rising sharply above the rest: "Let's come to order! I

have grave news to share!” The hubbub ceased at once, and the voice of the old man continued for a bit, now too low to be heard in the sacristy.

Whatever the man said had a deep impact on the audience, for the moment he was finished there was a chorus of shouts, screeches and what sounded like animal wails. “Silence!!” bellowed the old man. “He is asleep next door and may hear us!!”

Instead of quieting down, the nave erupted in a cacophony of angry human and non-human screams. One voice then rose above the rest, in a raw baritone that I recognized as belonging to one of the men I had met on the hill: “We can’t let him get out! He has seen a J’ork!”

I had heard enough. I ran to the back door from which the man had come and gone earlier. It was locked. The room’s window appeared too narrow and too far up the wall to provide an escape route.

As escape was impossible, I met the danger head on. I grasped the only available weapon, the lit candelabrum, and ran into the nave. I was confronted by a mob scene: a crowd had gathered around the round table, where fourteen figures sat in various states of agitation. Two of them were the hunters I had encountered in the afternoon.

Half of those present seemed more or less human, but the rest were strange creatures, with low skulls and prominent brow ridges above their eyes. They were hairy, stocky, and dressed in rags that barely covered their privates. The central part of their faces protruded forward and were dominated by very big, wide noses. They were as ugly as anything I had seen outside a zoo.

I tried to get past them, moving purposefully towards the front door, but I was seized at once by a couple of the quasi-apes and forced back to the center of the room. I soon realized that any efforts at resistance would be unsuccessful.

I was shoved at the round table. The old man that I had taken for a priest got up, made room for me to be seated, and stood behind me, holding me in position by pressing down on my shoulders. Despite his age and apparent infirmity, his grip was strong.

He addressed me, but his words were meant for the entire congregation. "Your coming to the Los Juanes area has been unfortunate. We keep patrols on the town's perimeter and the first hill to keep strangers out. The business we conduct with the rest of the island takes place during the day, in the center of town, and we try to minimize outside contacts by sending carts to other villages to trade and buy necessities. We do our best to be unwelcoming, and for the most part succeed in keeping visitors away. Somehow you managed to elude our guards and saw one of our friends. I thought that by confining you to the back room we would be able to keep you until it was safe to release you, but it was not to be." He paused, as if reluctant to proceed.

"Now you have met what I would call some unusual members of our community. What you have seen cannot be unseen. The question is what to do with you now to protect their privacy."

At these words, there were shouts of "Kill him," "He has to die," "Like we did to the Italians," and other threats and grunts. The old man pounded on the table and demanded:

“Silence! We are not animals. We’ll give due consideration to the situation and all the risks involved, and then decide what course of action is the best!”

He turned to me again: “I’m afraid that we will need to put you under guard for the time being. You will be back in the room where you slept.”

* * *

I lost track of time and could not remember exactly how long I had been confined in the room. In a drawer in the cabinet there was a thin stack of prayer books and I started writing notes in the margins with a stubby pencil I found. Judging by the number of books I filled, at least a couple of weeks went by; my unkempt beard was also an indicator of the duration of my ordeal. If the townspeople in the resort where I stayed could have seen my condition, their smirks would have turned to derisive laughs.

I was visited daily by someone from the village who came to bring me food, clean the bathroom and sweep the floor. They were always dour women who resisted my attempts to draw them into conversation. I had not seen the old man again, nor any of the male inhabitants of Los Juanes. They kept me in complete ignorance of what was going on in this village or what they intended to do with me, but the reference to “the Italians” was unnerving.

A few days after the start of my confinement, a fresh face showed up with my dismal dinner. It was a middle-aged woman that appeared distraught as she paced around the room. “You look sad,” I commented, expecting silence in return. “My husband died yesterday.” She broke down into tears.

I walked up to her and circled my arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry to hear that," I instinctively responded. Her body heaved under my touch. Then, unexpectedly, she went on: "Those brutes killed him."

I held my breath. "Which brutes?" I asked, as softly as I could. "The J'ork" she replied. "I hate'em!"

That was the opening I needed. "Who are they?"

Between crying fits, she told an astonishing story.

"The first settlers of the village, over two centuries ago, were a knot of immigrants from the mainland led by two cousins, Juan Francisco Melendez and Juan José de Armas, who named the settlement 'Los Juanes' after themselves. A few weeks after the initial efforts to establish a town, one of the colonists came upon a young child roaming the hill. It was a creature that looked more like a hairy ape than a human. The captive fought fiercely, but was subdued, brought to the village, and placed in a cage. All efforts to communicate with him were answered with snarls and guttural cries.

"That night, as the colonists sat around the fire near their half-finished huts, four adult creatures appeared from the darkness. They were armed with rudimentary clubs and advanced towards the villagers, making threatening gestures and swinging their weapons. Juan Melendez got up and calmly approached them, waving his arm in salutation.

"The leader of the creatures raised a club and aimed for his head. Everything seemed lost, but Melendez started a pantomime in which he imitated a crying child, pointed to

the visitors, and inquired, in words and gestures, 'Is he one of yours?'

"The creature lowered his club and nodded. Melendez asked his cousin in a low voice, 'Fetch the little monster and bring him here.' A few moments later, Juan de Armas returned, holding the child. No sooner had he and the visitors seen each other, they rushed to meet, and one of the creatures seized him and held him closely in its arms.

"Melendez turned to the group's leader and pointing to the meat roasting on a spit on the fire, made signs of hunger and invited the visitors to join them in supper. All partook of the food, and Melendez passed around a leather bota bag full of red wine. At first, the visitors looked at the wineskin suspiciously, but their leader put it to his mouth, took a swig, and opened his eyes wide with surprise and pleasure. He immediately handed it to one of his companions.

"The colonists and the strange visitors had a convivial meal together and Melendez started conducting a sign language conversation with them. An hour later, when the visitors had become tipsy and sated, they returned to the woods. Colonists and creatures motioned goodbye to each other amiably.

"When they were gone, Melendez turned to his companions. 'I think we have made an amazing discovery. Whatever we do, let's keep the existence of these creatures to ourselves. I'll write to my uncle the priest and see if he knows anything about them and can recommend what we should do. He is a wise and learned man.'

"While letters were exchanged back and forth with the

Continent, the colonists got to see the creatures many times. They seemed to understand the rudiments of human language but were unable to speak. They referred to themselves as the J'ork and lived in caves in the hills around Los Juanes. They used wood and made sharpened stone tools, knew fire, and survived by hunting small animals, digging roots and eating berries. Despite their bestial appearance, they appeared somewhat intelligent.

“After a very long wait, Melendez heard back from his uncle. ‘All I have been able to find out is rumor, legend and conjecture. Old wives’ tales claim that once men shared the earth with other, more primitive beings that were similar to them but less advanced. Over time, men overcame and extinguished those beings. Their existence is not mentioned in the Holy Books or any of the histories of the various peoples of the earth. So, I must conclude that the tales are just myths. On the other hand, it is possible that the creatures once existed, and a handful have survived in your isolated island. I caution you to keep your finding secret until you are ready to reveal it to the world.’

“Melendez followed his uncle’s admonition. When Los Juanes was finished and everyone moved in, they purposefully isolated themselves from the rest of the island to prevent discovery of their odd neighbors. A few months later, Melendez died of a fever and de Armas became head of the colony. He retained the veil of secrecy instituted by his cousin, and little by little the two groups became closer to each other. Early the following year, a female J'ork gave birth to a child who partook of the traits of both her parents: she was taller and thinner than her mother and had humanlike features, marred by a pronounced brow and a wide nose. As the two races

started interbreeding, thoughts of revealing the existence of the J'ork were abandoned.

“Things stayed peaceful until Father Manich arrived” continued the woman. “He had been sent from the Continent to establish new parishes on the island. But he is a rude and ill-tempered man, and other towns came to reject him and sought his recall. Instead of returning home, however, he came to Los Juanes and convinced the population here that there was a need for a proper religious center. Some wanted to lynch him, but a majority agreed to build him a church instead. When I was born, the church was already up and in use.

“Father Manich learned early of the existence of the J'ork and became convinced that it was his moral duty to evangelize them. His efforts always met indifference or actual resistance. Finally, he gave up trying to convert the savages and turned the church that had been built into a social center where members of both races could gather. That's where we are today.”

“Why do you still hide the J'ork from the rest of the world?” I asked, incredulously.

“We are largely related to them by now. Also, the J'ork are at least equal in numbers to us humans and we fear there could be a bloody encounter if the J'ork learned we were going to betray them. The J'ork can be quite violent. Recently, there have been brawls over food between J'ork and humans. My husband was killed in one of those.”

I took advantage of my new familiarity with the woman to make a request. “I am very thankful for the long story you have told me. Now, could you do me another big favor?”

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Could you get me a table? I spend all day sitting on that chair but have no place to rest my arms or put a plate of food when it's brought to me."

"I'll see what I can do."

* * *

Every night, after the church quieted down, I climbed on the table and set to work on the plaster around the window frame using an iron crucifix whose head I had laboriously sharpened as my tool. I constantly feared that my efforts would be discovered, or that my captors would finally decide to do away with me, or that the enlarged opening of the window would still be too narrow to allow me to get through, or that I would break something when I jumped down to the courtyard, or that I would be captured and put to death. I was besieged by an army of worries.

Yet I was undeterred and continued to work away at the plaster, which was crumbly and broke off easily. And, one night, I finished removing a thumb's width of frame from all around the window. I carefully took the window down, slats and hinges and all, and set it on the table.

I left the prayer books with my story in the cabinet where I found them. If I made it out and was able to escape, I would be able to tell the story on my own and bring justice to this godforsaken town. If I failed, someone might someday discover the narrative of my confinement and remember me with pity.

* * *

I barely squeezed through the window's hole, got lost as I went through Los Juanes in the dark, and stumbled and fell a couple of times as I fled madly away. I almost cleared the village, but as I reached its outskirts I was confronted by a small, non-human figure: a young J'ork, barely in his teens.

I never knew what the youth was doing out in the middle of the night; presumably it was his turn to patrol the village to spot strangers. Whatever his mission, he came at me brandishing a club and screaming in a shrill voice in an attempt to raise the alarm.

I panicked. I jumped at him to throttle his cries and we fought. He was strong for his age, but I was driven by desperation, so I overpowered him and, to my eternal shame, lost my self-control. The fear and resentment that had accumulated during my imprisonment exploded in a whirlwind of rage; I wrestled the club from his hands and started beating him over the head, on his arms and chest, wherever I could land a blow.

It was over in a minute. After the first couple of blows he stopped resisting and lay on the ground, unable to parry my attacks. But I did not let off. I kept beating his body to a bloody pulp, until I stopped, exhausted, and gazed at the immobile figure beneath me. I had killed him.

I then continued to run away until I was overcome by exhaustion. In the early morning, I was picked up not far from the resort by an oxen-driven cart laden with coal. I was barely conscious, battered and bleeding, so the cart driver took me to a dispensary where nuns cared for my wounds and let me rest for a couple of days before allowing the police constable to interrogate me.

As I lay waiting for the officer's visit, I was assaulted by doubt. Should I reveal what I had seen and experienced? Vindication would give me pleasure, but the boy's slaying would probably be revealed, and I would have to face justice for my actions.

When the officer arrived, I said that I had fallen in the hills, injured my head, and had been wandering aimlessly for many days, suffering from amnesia. I could tell he did not believe my story, but no crime had been exposed and I was left alone.

I tried to rationalize my silence on grounds other than trying to hide my culpability. The people of Los Juanes and the J'ork had lived in harmony for over a couple of centuries. Did I have the right to disturb their peace? Who knows what the "civilized" world would do to these lost ancestors of the human race? Put them in cages and display them in zoos? Turn them over to the scientists for their experiments? Men are cruel to anyone who is weaker or different.

I also told myself that I owed no debt of gratitude to the inhabitants of Los Juanes, human or J'ork, and the death of the youth was their own fault. I wanted to leave the island quietly and avoid further entanglements that might land me in prison or hold me there for a long time.

I returned home, but the memory of Los Juanes has travelled back with me. I was bedeviled by daytime fears and assaulted by nightmares. I suffered until, one day, I came to understand that all I felt was fear of retribution, not remorse. The villagers of Los Juanes and the J'ork were miserable creatures that deserved punishment. The slaying of one of their number was only scant retribution

for the ills they had visited on me. I relived in my mind the bone-crushing blows I had inflicted on the young savage and the memory brought me only an odd satisfaction.

The discovery of has yet to occur. I attribute this to the remoteness of the island, and the enforced isolation of the village on the hill. Yet, their existence coming to light is inevitable, and if civilization finds the J'ork while I am alive my misgivings may come to life. For that reason, it will be fine by me if the secrets of Los Juanes remain shrouded in mystery for a little bit longer.

In the meantime, I will continue to struggle with the pangs of my conscience. I am certainly not a better person than when I went on this fateful vacation; indeed, I am more callous and less respectful of human life than I was then. I made a great discovery but derived no benefit from it and will have to live with its consequences the rest of my days.

AUTHOR'S STORY NOTE

The Village was intended to examine the assumed superiority of modern man over its ancestors, and his ability to coexist with other creatures that inhabit our imperiled world.